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Literary Culture in Early Christian Ireland: Hiberno-Latin Saints' Lives as a Source for
Seventh-Century Irish History

A Dissertation Presented

by

JOHN M. HIGGINS

Submitted to the Graduate School of the
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

September 2018

History

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Literary Culture in Early Christian Ireland: Hiberno-Latin Saints' Lives as a Source for
Seventh-Century Irish History

A Dissertation Presented

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MEMORIAE SACRUM

COLUMBAE

FILII CARISSIMI

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I have given parts of this dissertation as papers in various venues over the years. I am grateful to the audiences for discussion of my work and for questions that have helped me to clarify my arguments. In particular, I acknowledge Trinity College, Dublin; the TCD/UCD Classical Colloquium; the Harvard Celtic Colloquium; the Irish Conference of Medievalists; the International Congress of Medieval Studies, Kalamazoo; the Classical Association of New England; and Classical Association of Connecticut. To all my thanks.

My greatest debt is to my dissertation director, Anna Taylor, *per quam non licet esse neglegentem*. Anna's constant encouragement and demanding responses to her

probing reading of my drafts have done more than anyone to help me clarify my argument and especially my expression. I cannot thank her enough.

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ABSTRACT

LITERARY CULTURE IN EARLY CHRISTIAN IRELAND: HIBERNO-LATIN
SAINTS' LIVES AS A SOURCE FOR SEVENTH-CENTURY IRISH HISTORY

SEPTEMBER 2018

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The writers of seventh-century Irish saints' *Lives* created the Irish past. Their accounts of the fifth-and-sixth century saints framed the narrative of early Irish Christianity for their contemporary and later audience. Cogitosus's *Life of Brigit*, Muirchú's and Tírechán's accounts of Saint Patrick, and Adomnán's *Life of Columba* have guided the understanding of early Irish history from then until now.

Unlike other early texts these *Lives* are securely dated. Composed as tools in the discourse regarding authority in seventh-century Irish ecclesiastical and secular politics, they provide historical insights not available from other sources. In the seventh century Armagh and Kildare competed for primacy over the Irish church; these religious centers also were involved in politics, with Armagh's claims supported by the Uí Néill kings, whom Armagh supported. Kildare, in Leinster, was outside the Uí Néill political sphere. The *Lives* are part of the historicizing understanding of their past that the Irish developed

in the seventh century. These *Lives* were weapons in the conflicts between North and South for political and ecclesiastical power.

The authors used stories of saints to create the narrative of early Ireland. Their literary choices included the literary form of hagiography, miracle stories, and the stories' rhetorical style.

The *Lives* are Christian biographies. They create a world through miracle stories. Individual details of expression associated ecclesiastical foundations and secular dynasties with religio-political power derived from the saints.

The saints' *Lives* create the past by representing the words and actions of the saints in elaborately decorated language. Because of the elaborate language, the saints' words and actions acquire authoritative credibility: the rhetoric indicates that the words participate in divine reality.

The source of the style of seventh-century Hiberno-Latin writing includes elements of Late Latin, the Bible, and native Irish poetry. This is not merely decorative, but functions to show that saints are not bound by mundane reality, but have a direct connection to heaven; their deeds and sayings acquire even more power and effect in this world. The style ultimately promotes the political/ecclesiastical elites of the seventh century by showing that they derived power from actions of their saints.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Main Texts

Muirchu and Tirechan are referred to by Book, Chapter, and Section in Bieler, Ludwig. *The Patrician Texts in the Book of Armagh*, edited with introduction, translation, and commentary, with a contribution by Fergus Kelly. Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1979.

Cogitosus's Life of Brigit has not received a modern edition; Colgan's edition in *Trias Thaumaturga* (Louvain, 1647), is reprinted in the most convenient form in *PL LXXII*, 775-90. Cogitosus is referred to according to the chapters in the Connolly/Picard translation: Sean Connolly and J.-M. Picard. "Cogitosus's 'Life of St Brigit': Content and Value." *The Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland* Vol. 117, (1987), pp. 5-27. Reprinted in Noel Kissane, *Saint Brigit of Kildare: Life, Legend and Cult* (Dublin: Open Air, 2017), 270-87.

Adomnán has been edited in Adomnán. *Adomnán's Life of Columba*. Marjorie Ogilvie Anderson (Editor), Alan Orr and Marjorie Ogilvie Anderson (Translators). (Oxford: Oxford University Press; 2 edition, 1991). Adomnán is referred to according to Book, Chapter, and section the edition's commentary by reference to Anderson and Anderson with page number.

Classical and Late Latin authors are referred to conventionally by Book, Chapter, and Section.

Other Abbreviations

AASS

Acta Sanctorum, Bollandists

AU

The Annals of Ulster (to A.D. 1131), edited by Seán Mac Airt and Gearóid Mac Niocaill. Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1983.

BCLL

Lapidge, Michael, and Richard Sharpe, A *Bibliography of Celtic-Latin Literature, 400-1200* (Royal Irish Academy Dictionary of Medieval Latin from Celtic Sources, Ancillary Publications 1, Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, 1985). Generally entries are cited by catalogue number.

Bede, *HE*

Bede, *Historia Ecclesiastica*: Colgrave, Bertram, and Roger Aubrey Baskerville Mynors. *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

Bieler, <i>Patrician Texts</i>	Bieler, Ludwig. <i>The Patrician Texts in the Book of Armagh</i> . edited with introduction, translation, and commentary, with a contribution by Fergus Kelly. (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1979).
Byrne, <i>Irish Kings and High Kings</i>	Byrne, Francis J., <i>Irish Kings and High Kings</i> , second edition (Dublin: Four Courts 2001).
Charles-Edwards, <i>ECI</i>	Charles-Edwards, T.M. <i>Early Christian Ireland</i> . (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).
CMCS	<i>Cambridge (then Cambrian) Medieval Celtic Studies</i>
DVC	<i>De Vita Columbae</i> , Adomnan
Fouracre and Gerberding	Fouracre, Paul and Richard A. Gerberding. <i>Late Merovingian France: History and Hagiography 640-720</i> . (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996).
Heffernan <i>Sacred Biography</i>	Heffernan, Thomas. <i>Sacred Biography: Saints and their Biographers in the Middle Ages</i> (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1988).
Heist	Heist, W.W., ed., <i>Vitae sanctorum Hiberniae ex codice olim Salmanticensi nunc Bruxellensi</i> . (Subsidia Hagiographica, 28. Brussels: Société des Bollandistes, 1965).
Herbert, <i>Iona Kells and Derry</i>	Herbert, Máire. <i>Iona, Kells, and Derry: The History and Hagiography of the Monastic Familia of Columba</i> . Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1996.
Howlett, <i>Celtic Latin Tradition</i>	Howlett, D.R. <i>The Celtic Latin Tradition of Biblical Style</i> . Blackrock, Co. Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1995.
Howlett, <i>Saint Patrick</i>	Howlett, D.R. <i>The Book of Letters of Saint Patrick the Bishop: Liber Epistularum Sancti Patricii Episcopi</i> . (Dublin: Four Courts Press 1994).
Howlett, <i>Muirchú</i>	Howlett, David. <i>Muirchú Moccu Maethéni's "Vita Sancti Patricii: Life of Saint Patrick</i> . Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2006.

Hughes, <i>The Church</i>	Hughes, Kathleen. <i>The Church in Early Irish Society</i> . (London: Methuen, 1966).
Hughes <i>Early Christian Ireland</i>	<i>Early Christian Ireland: Introduction to the Sources</i> . (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1972).
Johnston, <i>Literacy and Identity</i>	Johnston, Elva. <i>Literacy and Identity in Early Medieval Ireland</i> . (Woodbridge, Surrey and Rochester NY, Boydell and Brewer, 2013).
Kelly, <i>Early Irish Law</i>	Kelly, Fergus <i>A Guide to Early Irish Law</i> (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1988).
Kenney	Kenney, J.F. <i>The Sources of the Early History of Ireland: Volume I, Ecclesiastical</i> . (New York: Columbia University Press, 1929). Generally entries are cited by item number.
McCone, <i>Pagan Past</i>	McCone, Kim. <i>Pagan Past and Christian Present in Early Irish Literature</i> . (Maynooth: An Sagart, 1990).
MGH	<i>Monumenta Germaniae Historica</i> .
NHI	Ó Cróinín, Dáibhí. (ed.) <i>A New History of Ireland, Volume I: Prehistoric and Early Ireland</i> . (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008). Individual chapters are identified with author's name.
Ó Cróinín <i>EMI</i> ²	Ó Cróinín, Dáibhí. <i>Early Medieval Ireland 400-1200</i> . (Second edition London: Routledge, 2017).
PRIA	<i>Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy, Section C</i>
PL	<i>Patrologia Latina</i>
Sharpe, <i>Saints' Lives</i>	Sharpe, Richard. <i>Medieval Irish Saints' Lives: an Introduction to Vitae Sanctorum Hiberniae</i> . (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991).
Sharpe, <i>Adomnán</i>	<i>Adomnán of Iona: Life of St. Columba</i> , translated by Richard Sharpe. (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England ; New York: Penguin Books, 1991).
Stancliffe, <i>Martin</i>	Stancliffe, Clare. <i>St. Martin and his Hagiographer: History and Miracle in Sulpicius Severus</i> . (Oxford : Clarendon Press; New York: Oxford University Press, 1983).

Walsh and Ó Cróinín

Walsh, Maura and Dáibhí Ó Cróinín, eds.
Cummian's Letter De controversia paschali,
together with a related Irish computistical tract
"De ratione computandi." (Toronto: Pontifical
Institute of Medieval Studies, Studies and Texts 86,
1988).

Map 1: Early Medieval Ireland



CHAPTER 1

IRISH LIVES AND THE IRISH PAST

The writers of the *Saints' Lives* from seventh-century Ireland (the “Land of Saints and Scholars” in popular culture) were the creators of the Irish past. Their accounts of the fifth-and-sixth century saints framed the narrative of early Irish Christianity for their contemporary audience and for subsequent generations. Cogitosus’s *Life of Brigit*, Muirchú’s and Tírechán’s accounts of Saint Patrick, and Adomnán’s *Life of Columba* (sometimes called by his Old Irish name, Colum Cille) have guided the understanding of early Irish history from the time of their composition until now. I argue that these three saints became immensely significant figures in Irish history precisely because they were written about. The early scholarly authors created the narrative of early Christian Ireland through the stories of the saints, and the literary strategies included in the form of saintly biography, the content of miracle stories, and the stories’ specific rhetorical style.

The *Lives* provide unique historical insights not available from other sources. The *Lives* were composed as tools in the discourse regarding authority in seventh-century Ireland in ecclesiastical and secular politics: they were written to aggrandize their subjects in such a way as to make the saints uniquely powerful as religio-political leaders. The seventh century saw competition between Armagh and Kildare for primacy over the Irish church.¹ Each of the religious centers also was involved in the secular political world, with Armagh’s claims supported by the Uí Néill, whom Armagh in turn supported. Kildare, on the other hand, was outside the Uí Néill sphere and was involved in the dynastic politics of Leinster. The texts we are studying, Muirchú and Tírechán from

¹ See Chapter 2 below.

Armagh and the somewhat earlier Cogitosus in Kildare, were weapons in the ecclesiastical dispute and hence in secular politics. The fourth text, considered the acme of Irish hagiography, is Adomnán's *Vita Columbae*, which establishes Columba, himself a member of the Cenél Conall branch of the Northern Uí Néill, as the patron of Scotland and of Iona, and as the religious supporter of the Pictish and Dal Riada kings.

An example of the way that the literary techniques function appears in Muirchú's *Life of Patrick* 1.12.3. Patrick has just returned to Ireland as a bishop and first went to convert Miliucc, the man who had been his master when he had been a slave. Miliucc did not want to convert and especially did not want to submit to Patrick, who had been his slave; he therefore committed suicide by burning himself alive. Patrick reacts:

Stupefactus igitur ad hoc opus duabus aut tribus fere horis nullum uerbum proferens, suspirans et gemens lacrimansque atque haec uerba promens ait: "nescio deus scit, hic homo rex, qui se ipsum igni tradidit ne crederet in fine uitae suae et ne seruiet Deo aeterno, nescio deus scit, nemo de filiis eius sedebit rex super sedem regni eius a generatione in generationem; insuper et semen eius seruiet in sempiternum."

Stunned by this sight, (he stood there) for two or three hours without uttering a word, sighing and mourning and weeping, and then, uttering these words, he said: "I know not, God knows, this man and king, who chose to burn himself in fire, so that he would not believe at the end of his life and serve eternal God, I know not, God knows, none of his sons shall sit on his throne as king of his kingdom from generation to generation; what is more, his line shall be subordinate forever."²

In this passage Muirchú gives the ostensible reason that Miliucc's family were not rulers in the seventh century even though they had been in the fifth: Miliucc refused to submit

² Muirchú 1.12 Bieler, 81 with slight changes. Note also the biblical reminiscences (Thomas O'Loughlin, *Discovering Saint Patrick*, Paulist Press: New York and Mahwah, 2005, 202-03 notes 2 *Cor.* 12.2 and several parallels for Miliucc's throne as the throne of David).

to the religious authority of Patrick, as he ought to have done. The political situation in the seventh century is thus, for Muirchú and his readers, a result of divine activity earlier.

Muirchú establishes the divine foundation of Patrick's prophecy about the fate of Miliucc's descendants in three ways in this passage. First, the fact that it appears as an anecdote in a saintly biography (a preferable term to "hagiography;" see below, Chapter 4) means that the audience of the *Life* expected that the literary work would show the biographical subject's superiority to his opponents. The prophecy itself is an example of the saint's miraculous power; since he is a saint, he is close to God and therefore his prophecy is true. Finally, the words of the prophecy are rhetorically decorated in a way that makes them special. In particular, the alliteration of "-s-" in "nemo de filiis eius sedebit...super sedem" and "semen eius seruiet in sempiternum" associates the ideas of ruling and Miliucc's descendants being barred from doing so. The alliteration supports the meaning of the miraculous prophecy; the prophecy acquires force through its being in a biography of a saint.

Muirchú's work was part of the propagandistic movement of the seventh century to establish Armagh, Patrick's see, as the head of the Irish church, and the Uí Néill dynasty, Armagh's patrons, as the dominant political force in the country. At the same time Cogitosus, in his rival *Life of Saint Brigit*, the patron of Kildare, challenged the claims of Armagh; shortly thereafter, Adomnán, Columba's successor as abbot of Iona, presented the claims of the Columban confederation of monasteries to ecclesiastical power in his *Life of Saint Columba*.

In this dissertation I argue from the evidence of the literary form of the *Lives*, the miraculous content of the *Lives* and the rhetorical decoration of the *Lives* that the authors

use these literary elements to establish the sanctity and supernatural power of these saints, and therefore the divine sanction for the Irish political and ecclesiastical order which the saints established for themselves and for the secular rulers who were their patrons. In the seventh century, Ireland was undergoing rapid change in nearly every aspect of its culture. Particularly important were the changes to political structure and religious associations such as the monasteries, the main ways in which new dynasties and the new Christian religion exercised power from the fifth century on. Change generated confusion, so that by the seventh century, the need for an agreed view of the past was acute.

The monasteries were the leading intellectual centers throughout the country, engaged in the major intellectual project of creating the Irish past by generating a corpus of historical material in many literary forms. During the seventh century, monastic writers created a past for their country by providing or inventing a narrative that supported the ecclesiastical and secular powers that were their patrons.³ The *Annals* and *Genealogies* were among the first works that attempted to organize the past, beginning as

³ For the idea of “the Past,” see J.H. Plumb *The Death of the Past* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973) and Lowenthal, David. *The Past is Another Country* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1985). They distinguish “The Past” from genuine history. “The Past” is a useable construction. The “Past” as distinct from academic “History” is something useful: it sanctions contemporary social conditions by placing their origins in a privileged position and puts the present into a relationship with what has happened and what will happen in the future. “History” is not useful in the same way, but is a scientific form of inquiry. A work of considerable utility, although not medieval in character, is Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Beacon Press, Boston, 1995), which treats of the creation of a “dossier” of material that was created in nineteenth century Haiti; some sources were privileged and others discarded as proper to write the history of Haiti. Further, see Chapter 5 Part 4, “Creating the Past: Trouillot and Others,” below.

early as the sixth century.⁴ Their historical purpose is obvious: they were written to create a chronological framework and to identify the most significant events in each year. Other works of significance in the creation of an Irish past also appeared during the seventh century: the *Auraicept na n-Éces*, a work that describes the origins of the Irish language, and the *Senchas Már*, the earliest codification of Irish law, trace their origins to this period.⁵ Narrative history (even in as abrupt a format as that found in the *Annals*), a national law, and a national language were all very significant additions to the creation of a specifically national past.⁶

Saints' *Lives* were another important feature of the new intellectual project. The *Lives* work on several levels: they support the picture of Irish history as presented in the *Annals*, *Genealogies*, and other works and present a separate narrative of the specifically ecclesiastical history of the country, thus providing an especially authoritative voice to describe the past. Since the saints are presented as close to divine reality, the authority of the saints in political and ecclesiastical matters is higher than that of merely secular

⁴ For the bibliography of the various *Annals* see Kathleen Hughes, *Early Christian Ireland: Introduction to the Sources* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1972); On Irish *Annals*, the major study by Daniel P. McCarthy, *The Irish Annals: Their Genesis, Evolution and History*. (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2008) is essential. See also Nicholas Evans, *The Present and the Past in Medieval Irish Chronicles*, 1-16. (Boydell and Brewer, 2010), and T. M. Charles-Edwards, *The Chronicle of Ireland*. Vol. 1 (Liverpool University Press, 2006).

⁵ Ahlqvist, Anders. "The Early Irish Linguist. An Edition of the Canonical Part of the *Auraicept na n-Éces*. With Introduction, Commentary and Indices." *Commentationes Humanarum Litterarum Helsinki* 73 (1982): 1-81; *Corpus genealogiarum sanctorum Hiberniae*. ed. Pádraig Ó Riain (Dublin: DIAS, 1985); *Corpus iuris Hibernici: ad fidem codicum manuscriptorum*, recognovit D. A. Binchy (Baile Átha Cliath: Institiúid Ard-Léinn Bhaile Átha Cliath, 1978), for all the early legal texts.

⁶ Thus Patrick Wadden, *Theories of National Identity in Early Medieval Ireland* (D.Phil. thesis, Oxford University 2011).

powers. The authority of the *Lives* in structuring the Irish past derives from the literary elements in the *Lives* themselves: the saint's *Life* as a literary medium, the miracle stories as its content, and the verbal decoration of the words of the *Life* as the means to create meaning bolster the narrative and provide it with unique credibility.

The seventh-century Irish obsessed over the sources of power: the power of the monastic federations or *paruchia*, and the sources of their income; the ecclesiastical power of episcopal primacy, with implications for income as well; and the political power of the different secular kingdoms and dynasties. The legitimacy of these newer forms of governmental and religious institutions required a firm base in the past when they were founded. It was especially important during the seventh century to establish authority in the past, since the emergence of the dispute over the date of Easter divided the church into factions, each disputing the legitimacy of the other. Each faction tried to assert the rightness of its opinion by appealing to history: the history of each ecclesiastical foundation and its consequent claim to authority based on the prestige of the founding saint. All forms of power—political and ecclesiastic—were ultimately based on the position on the paschal dispute taken by the monastery or bishopric and the reflected power of the kings who supported them.

1. Constructing the Past with Literary Sources

The writers of the seventh century and earlier promoted their views of the Irish past through their writings. The literature of early medieval Ireland is remarkably rich, including, in addition to the saints' *Lives*, a large corpus in a huge variety of literary

forms and in two languages.⁷ These include, in Latin, scholarly works, biblical criticism, hymns, computistical texts, theology, and penitentials; in Old Irish the works are even more diverse, including heroic sagas, such as the *Táin Bo Cuailgne*, saints' *Lives*, and other types of writing.⁸ The historiography of early Ireland is thus closely bound up with reading literary texts.⁹

While there was certainly considerable literary production during the seventh century, the status of many works is problematic. While many of the Latin language works of religious and grammatical scholarship are attributable to specific authors, many more texts in both languages are anonymous and exist only in much later copies. This makes dating difficult; literature in Old Irish is particularly difficult to date with any

⁷ It is no accident that the seminal works in the area are studies of the sources, both Latin and Old Irish. The most important are: for Latin sources, Michael Lapidge and Richard Sharpe, *A Bibliography of Celtic-Latin Literature, 400-1200*, (Royal Irish Academy Dictionary of Medieval Latin from Celtic Sources, Ancillary Publications 1, Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, 1985), abbreviated here as *BCLL*. For Old Irish literature: Muireann Ní Bhrolcháin, *An Introduction to Early Irish Literature*. (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2009); James Carney, "Language and Literature to 1169," *NHI*, 452-510; for Old Irish writings on ecclesiastical themes, see J.F. Kenney, J.F. *The Sources of the Early History of Ireland: Volume 1, Ecclesiastical* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1929). Kenney remains essential, even though it is necessarily outdated. Kathleen Hughes, *Early Christian Ireland: A Guide to the Sources* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1979) introduces all the sources.

⁸ No comprehensive reference work exists for Old Irish literature parallel *BCLL*, for Latin. Ecclesiastical writings are described in Kenney; Ní Bhrolcháin *An Introduction to Early Irish Literature* is the latest survey of non-religious material.

⁹ See Ó Cróinín, "Ireland, 400-800," *NHI* and Hughes, *Early Christian Ireland*. There is some evidence to suggest that the early medieval Irish constructed buildings meant to increase the power and prestige of particular locales, such as Kildare or Armagh, but the evidence is not abundant. It is true that there has been an increase in recent years of archaeological excavation and surveys of early medieval sites throughout the island: Aidan O'Sullivan A, Finbar McCormick, Thomas R. Kerr, and Lorcan Harney. *Early Medieval Ireland AD 400-1100. The evidence from archaeological excavations* (Dublin: Royal Irish Academy. 2014).

precision. The accounts of Old Irish literature by Dillon and by Ní Bhrolcháin both give details of the manuscripts in which Old Irish literature is found, primarily inscribed in the fourteenth to sixteenth centuries, but neither is able to give precise dates for the composition.¹⁰ Linguistic evidence is the most helpful for texts written in Old Irish, the form of the language dated to 600-900, but many of the texts have been grammatically regularized to Middle Irish (900-1100) or Early Modern Irish (after 1100) by later redactors. It is not clear that grammatical updating is the only editorial activity of the scribes. Many of the Old Irish sagas and other works may well go back to seventh-century exemplars, but the degree of accretion of later material is unclear. The Old Irish material shows literary features similar to those of the Latin saints' *Lives*, including the *rosc* verse form.¹¹ The narrative features of the *Lives* mirror those in the Irish material and clearly derive from a closely related literary tradition.

Computus and the Date of Easter

Many works in Old Irish or Latin are directly useful as sources for contemporary ecclesiastical politics. Several texts specifically deal with the issues affecting the Irish church in the seventh century and provide important information about the Easter

¹⁰ See Ní Bhrolcháin, *op. cit.*, and Myles Dillon, *Early Irish Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948, repr. Dublin, Four Courts Press 1997).

¹¹ *Roscad* (plural) are Old Irish poems that appear in prose, or more accurately *prosimetrum*, at moments of special significance. They also appear in Hiberno-Latin texts, particularly in *Lives* of saints, and notably in Adomnán's *De Vita Columbae*. See Gerald Murphy, *Early Irish Metrics* (Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, 1961). Johan Corthals, "Early Irish *Rhetorics* and their Late Antique Background," *CMCS* 31 (1996) examines *roscad* in Old Irish and connects the style to Late Latin poetry, but does not directly address the saints' *Lives*.

Controversy or form part of the intellectual world then developing as biblical commentaries or grammatical works. Previous scholars have read these sources in a variety of ways. Computus, the science of calculating the date of Easter, was a centrally important part of Irish monastic education, not only providing mathematical and scientific knowledge per se, but also arming the monks with weapons in the intellectual disputes of the seventh century. Ó Cróinín has read these computistical texts in the context of the intellectual issues in the paschal controversy.¹²

Hymns and Poetry

The Irish *Liber Hymnorum* is also a product of this period. The manuscript of the collection of hymns is somewhat later (ninth century), but the poems themselves date to the seventh century or earlier: indeed, one of the hymns, the “*Altus Prosator*” is attributed credibly to some, to the subject of one of our *Lives*, Columba, who died in 597.¹³ The verses of the *Liber Hymnorum* make it clear that the Irish were adept poets.¹⁴ At the end of the seventh century (c. 691) the *Antiphonary of Bangor* was inscribed at one of the

¹² Ó Cróinín’s computistical papers are collected in *Early Irish History and Chronology* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2003), and see *NHI*, 390-91.

¹³ Edition, Jane Stevenson, “Altus Prosator,” *Celtica* 23 (1999): 326-68, and Thomas Owen Clancy and Gilbert Márkus, *Iona: The Earliest Poetry of a Celtic Monastery* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press 1995), 39-68. Clancy and Márkus accept the authorship of Columba; Stevenson attributes the poem to seventh-century Iona. David Howlett suggests a seventh-century date and an identification of the author as Virgilius Maro Grammaticus: David Howlett, “Seven studies in seventh-century texts,” *Peritia* 10 (1996): 1-70, at 50-57.

¹⁴ John Henry Bernard and Robert Atkinson, eds. *The Irish Liber Hymnorum*. (London: Henry Bradshaw Society, 1898); Kenney #574; *BCLL* #542-564 and #578-91.

leading monasteries, Bangor, where Columbanus had studied nearly a century earlier.¹⁵

There are other poems from this period in both languages.¹⁶ The poetry in Latin and Irish forms a single corpus, employing similar versification and rhyming, and other poetic techniques.

The authors of the hymns construct the earlier history of their monastic foundations. Specifically, the authors of these poems used literary means to promote their founders. For instance, one of the earliest hymns, “*Audite omnes*,” is a praise of St. Patrick from his community. The *Antiphonary of Bangor* includes several poems in praise of the founder of that monastery, St. Comgall, of all his successors as abbot (up to Cronán, abbot between 680 and 691; his inclusion is the means of dating the manuscript), and in “*Benchuir bona regula*,” a praise of the monastery of Bangor itself. In these poems as in the other hymns the authors display considerable literary artistry in versification, rhyme, and structure. Through the hymns, the early Irish poets construct an Irish world in literary terms and show how sophisticated Irish intellectual life was.

Legal Literature

Legal literature in Old Irish and in Latin formed a significant part of the seventh-century construction of Irish identity in a way different from, but complementary to, that of the hymns. Binchy’s edition of the Old Irish Laws has generated research on their

¹⁵ *BCLL* #532; hymns from this MS are listed in *BCLL*, #572-77. The standard edition is F.E. Warren (ed.), *The Antiphonary of Bangor: An Early Irish Manuscript in the Ambrosian Library at Milan* (London: Henry Bradshaw Society, 1893); now, see Michael Curran, *The Antiphonary of Bangor and the Early Irish Monastic Liturgy* (Blackrock: Irish Academic Press, 1984); Kenney #568.

¹⁶See Ó Cróinín in *NHI* 391-93.

content and sources.¹⁷ Kelly's *A Guide to Early Irish Law* lists 79 legal texts, including ecclesiastical legislation in Latin as well as secular legislation in Irish; some of the texts are quite old.¹⁸ The *Senchas Már*, the first collection of laws, was inscribed perhaps in the eighth century, but the verse sections may be older (Dillon xvi).¹⁹ However, as Charles-Edwards says, "(t)he 'Senchas Már' is not easy to date."²⁰ The collection is, obviously, later than its component parts, and they are likely to be seventh century or earlier based on the dates of the manuscripts and the features of the language. The texts in the *Senchas Már* were written contemporaneously with the saints' *Lives* and other texts, and the collection is associated with much the same part of the country, the Uí Néill territories of the northern midlands.²¹ Indeed, the somewhat later introduction dates the compilation to a specific historical context, the arrival of Patrick. This is not possible in fact, but the writer of the introduction was concerned to place the text in the seventh-century historical narrative.²² Church law in Latin appeared in the same period: the massive *Collectio Canonum Hibernensis* was written concurrently with the Old Irish *Senchas Már*, although

¹⁷ Binchy, *Corpus iuris Hibernici*; Donnchadh Ó Corráin, Liam Breatnach, and Aidan Breen, "The laws of the Irish." *Peritia* 3 (1984): 382-438; Charles-Edwards "Early Irish Law," *NHI* 342; Kelly *Early Irish Law*.

¹⁸ Kelly *Early Irish Law* 264-83.

¹⁹ Myles Dillon. *Early Irish Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948), xvi.

²⁰ Charles-Edwards "Early Irish Law," *NHI* 342.

²¹ Kelly *Early Irish Law* 242-3 refers to parts of the text that refer to Loeguire mac Néill and Tara, fn. 3.

²² Kelly *Early Irish Law* 248. See Appendix 1 no. 2, 266; Kim McCone, "Dubthach maccu Lugair and a matter of life and death in the pseudo-historical prologue to the *Senchas Már*," *Peritia* 5 (1986): 1-35; now, Patrick Wadden, "The Pseudo-Historical Origins of the *Senchas Már* and Royal Legislation in Early Ireland," *Peritia* 27 (2016), 141-157.

with different aims.²³ Ecclesiastical legislation also appears in the penitentials collected in *The Irish Penitentials*.²⁴ Some of these texts such as the *Synodus Primus Sancti Patricii* and the *Penitentialis Uinniani* date from the sixth century or maybe even earlier, while the penitentials associated with Columbanus, Cummian, and Adomnán date to the seventh; so too perhaps the *Synodus Secundus Sancti Patricii*.²⁵

Annals and Genealogies

The extensive body of Irish *Annals* and *Genealogies* is also the product of the sixth and seventh centuries. Kelleher, Ó Corráin, and others have taught us to read the *Genealogies* and *Annals* as the constructions of “synthetic historians” who have a specific political agenda.²⁶ The *Annals* came to Ireland with Christianity, in the form of Rufinus’s *Chronicle* as developed by Sulpicius Severus.²⁷ They very soon developed into specifically Irish historical writing. McCarthy has shown that the chronicle of Iona was

²³ See Charles-Edwards, “Early Irish Law,” in *NHI* 361-66. The *Collectio Canonum Hibernensis* is listed in *BCLL* under #612-13 and dated to 700-725.

²⁴ Ludwig Bieler, ed. *The Irish Penitentials* (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies 1963) prints several canon law texts from the sixth and seventh centuries.

²⁵ Bieler, *Irish Penitentials*, for the dates.

²⁶ See Ó Cróinín’s comments in *NHI* 182-87; John Kelleher, “Early Irish History and Pseudo-History,” *Studia Hibernica* 3 (1968), 113-27; *id.*, “The Pre-Norman Irish *Genealogies*,” *Irish Historical Studies* 16 (1968), 138-53; Dáibhí Ó Cróinín, “Early Irish *Annals* from Easter Tables: A Case Restated,” *Peritia* 2 (1983), 74-86; McCarthy, *The Irish Annals*; Evans *The Present and the Past in Medieval Irish Chronicles*, 1-16; and Charles-Edwards, *The Chronicle of Ireland*.

²⁷ McCarthy *The Irish Annals* 133-39, “The Insular Evolution of the Rufinus-Sulpicius Chronicle,” and his summary on 150.

the foundation of the Irish annalistic tradition and was being kept already in the mid-sixth century, at first by Columba himself, “the premier saint of the Uí Néill.”²⁸

The *Genealogies* began in the seventh or even sixth century. Ó Corráin has interpreted these as the deliberate creation of the intellectuals of the Irish monastic centers, who “constantly and necessarily re-interpreted the past in the interest of the contemporary socio-political structures and power-holders,” and who provided “an agreed understanding of how the present came to be.”²⁹ The early *Genealogies* came out of the same milieu as the early saints’ *Lives* and are specifically associated with Laidcenn, the possible author of the *Life of Molua*.³⁰

2. Saints’ *Lives*

I read the Irish saints’ *Lives* as part of this historicizing literature: a component of the new understanding of the past that the Irish were developing across all this literature in the seventh century. At the time when the Irish church was overflowing with scholarship, when the legal writers were writing the legal codes in Irish and the *Collectio Canonum* in Latin, and when the *Genealogies* and *Annals* were beginning to take shape, the *Lives* were also a significant part of the literary landscape. The *Lives* provided a narrative of the interactions of the church with kings, and of the factions within the

²⁸ McCarthy, *The Irish Annals*, “The Iona Chronicle,” 153-67, at 158.

²⁹ Donnchadh Ó Corráin, “Creating the Past: the Early Irish Genealogical Tradition.” *Peritia* 12 (1998): 177-208.

³⁰ Ó Corráin, “Creating the Past,” 199-200; Paul Byrne, “Life of Saint Molua: Date and Authorship,” *Peritia* 24-25 (2013-2014), 90-107.

church itself. Of course, the *Lives* are primarily religious texts with a religious purpose. The saints operate primarily in the divine realm, the world of eternity. In the *Lives* the early Irish writers show how the saints connect eternity to history, the unfolding of the divine plan on earth through the working of miracles. The saintly world interpenetrates and affects the mundane.

3. Saints' *Lives* as a Component of the Historical Dossier

The corpus of saints' *Lives* from medieval Ireland is considerable but also problematic. These texts are an important literary source but many of them are difficult to date, for reasons similar to those that apply to the *Annals* and *Genealogies*. The majority of the texts are anonymous and are not datable to the seventh century as they stand in the manuscripts, which are all later than our period and underwent editing. Four texts (Muirchú's *Life of Patrick* and Tírechán's *Collectanea* from the *Book of Armagh*, Cogitosus' *Life of Brigit*, and the *Life of Columba* by Adomnán) date to the seventh century and were written as responses to specific identifiable contexts.³¹ Although Adomnán perhaps finished his work as late as 704, the date of his death, he was working on it before then in the literary milieu of the seventh century. I include Tírechán's work, which is not a *Life* of Patrick but is identified in the MS as "*Collectanea*," because it participates in the style of the other texts, particularly in the way in which it uses miracle stories and verbal decoration. Tírechán wrote about the saint in the same literary tradition

³¹ See "Abbreviations," above, for bibliography on the texts. The dating of the texts, not including Adomnán, is handily summarized in Charles-Edwards, *ECI*, 438-40.

and is best seen as an appendage of Muirchú's *Life*.³² These four works form a securely dated body of saints' *Lives* that were part of the literary creation of an Irish past in the seventh century.

A large body of anonymous Latin *Lives* of the Irish saints also survives, mainly in three manuscript families.³³ These manuscripts are considerably later than the texts they contain. The Codex Salmanticensis and the Codex Kilkenniensis or Dublinensis are from the fourteenth century. The third collection is extant in three manuscripts, two from the fourteenth century and the third from much later, the seventeenth.³⁴ Much previous work on these texts has been editorial. Based on codicological research, Richard Sharpe has

³² Richard Sharpe, *Medieval Irish Saints' Lives: an Introduction to Vitae Sanctorum Hiberniae* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 13. It is part of the "Patrick dossier" in Bieler's formulation.

³³ The texts are all listed in *BCLL*, #370-504, a total of 134 *Lives*. See also Hughes, *Early Christian Ireland* 217-47, and Kenney, *passim*. The major editions of the anonymous Latin saints' lives from early Ireland are: Charles Plummer, *Vitae Sanctorum Hiberniae: partim hactenus ineditae* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1910) and W.W. Heist, ed., *Vitae sanctorum Hiberniae ex codice olim Salmanticensi nunc Bruxellensi*. (Subsidia Hagiographica, 28; Brussels: Société des Bollandistes, 1965). Most of the *Lives* from the Collectio Oxoniensis are still unpublished.

It is worth noting that there is also a considerable *corpus* of *Lives* in Irish: seventeen are published in Charles Plummer, *Bethada Náem n Érenn: Lives of Irish Saints*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1922), but another eight are omitted. They are all dated later than the seventh century. While some may contain earlier material like other Old Irish literature (see above), they are in their present state not relevant to this study. Plummer also published a collection of Irish *Lives* not included in his earlier collection: Charles Plummer, ed. *Miscellanea hagiographica hibernica*. (Brussels: Société des Bollandistes, 1925). He includes in the same volume "A Tentative Catalogue of Irish Hagiography."

³⁴ *BCLL*, pp. 101; 110; 118; 124.

claimed that ten of the *Lives* edited by Heist from the Salamanca MS are products of the eighth century.³⁵

The ten *Lives* from the *Codex Salmanticensis*, edited by Heist, which Sharpe calls the “O’Donoghue Lives” survive, apparently with relatively little editing of the content. However, there is no indication of what other material (for instance, dedicatory epistles such as we find in Cogitosus and Muirchú) might have been lost during the later redactions of the eighth or fourteenth centuries.³⁶ The ten *Lives* Sharpe calls the “O’Donoghue Lives” may well rest on a foundation laid in the seventh century but they do not give reliable evidence for their original literary features. The purpose and context of the fourteenth-century collections are very different from those of the dateable texts by Cogitosus, Muirchú, Tírechán and Adomnán.³⁷

The saints’ *Lives* from the seventh century and from the later collections demand to be read as literary texts rather than simply as sources to be mined for tidbits of

³⁵ In addition to the named authors whom we have, Sharpe in *Saints’ Lives* has identified a corpus of ten saints’ *Lives* from the seventh century. The ten *Lives* he identifies are edited in Heist, 131-247.

Sharpe’s identification is by no means universally accepted (see Carey’s review of the book in *Speculum* 1993, for a discussion of the problems associated with dating the later *Lives*). Some of the *Lives* may derive from seventh century texts: Byrne identifies the *Life of Molua* as a work of Laidcenn who died in 661 and Howlett identifies the *Vita Prima Sanctae Brigidae* as the work of Ailerán, who died around 665): Byrne, “*Life of St Molua*,” David Howlett, “*Vita I Sanctae Brigidae*,” *Peritia* 12 (1998): 1-23. Howlett’s *Peritia* article is a reprint of *Chronicon* I (1997): 1-31 available at <http://www.ucc.ie/chronicon/howfra.htm> without notice of the earlier publication.

³⁶ See BCLL, #383-504, pp. 110-31.

³⁷ Sharpe, *Saints’ Lives*, 35. The context is Anglo-Irish and ecclesiastical.

information.³⁸ Seeing the works, each as a coherent whole, with a particular style and intention, will allow us to read them as their authors intended they be read in their own time and will give us a better understanding of the intellectual world in seventh-century Ireland. The authors of these texts were actors in the historical movements of the time. The literary qualities of style, form, and content of the *Lives* further the monasteries' political and ecclesiastical aims. The texts are more important sources for understanding the interactions between different religious and political communities than has been recognized.

However, reading the texts in a positivistic way, as repositories of discrete facts, is a very common approach taken by early medieval historians.³⁹ In this respect, the scholarly treatment of the Irish *Lives* is not much different from approaches to saints' *Lives* written in other places at other times; for example, Carolingian *Lives* in verse.⁴⁰ Previous scholarship on the Irish saints' *Lives* has seen these texts as sources for political, social, and economic history, not least as providing a way for the different monasteries to understand their identity. Ryan uses these texts to write an account of the religious life of

³⁸ Felice Lifshitz, "Beyond Positivism and "Genre": 'Hagiographic' Texts as Historical Narrative," *Viator*, 25, (1994) pp. 95–113 and Anna Taylor, *Epic Lives and Monasticism in the Middle Ages, 800-1050* (Cambridge University Press, 2013) are helpful on this point. Taylor points out that the literary form of epic *Lives* from the Carolingian period added "celestial and worldly authority" to the *Lives*, 10. *Mutatis mutandis*, the same is true for Hiberno-Latin prose *Lives*.

³⁹ "[B]obbing for data," in Lifshitz's words, "Beyond Positivism," 95, and see Taylor, *Epic Lives*, 11-20.

⁴⁰ Taylor, *Epic Lives*.

the Irish monasteries.⁴¹ Bitel's work on early Irish monasticism makes extensive use of the saints' *Lives* from all sources in her interpretation of the monastery as a social institution: the extensive *corpus* of saints' *Lives* reflects the importance of the newly developing monasteries in Irish society since they are all *Lives* of monastic founders.⁴² Other scholars, too, have used the *Lives* for similar purposes. Typical of one kind of scholarship is Doherty's article in the first number of *Peritia* on using the *Lives* as a source for economic history.⁴³ Doherty mines the *Lives*, especially those in Old Irish, for evidence of the legal relationships of monasteries and kingdoms. He instances, for example, the transfer of the property of the church of Énda to the church of Armagh as part of the development of Armagh's *paruchia*. The *paruchia*, that is the complex of diverse religious properties under a single head, was as significant an economic and political community as a religious one; the evidence of the early *Lives* is indeed important. Doherty does not read the snippets of information in a literary context at all, but rather as discrete facts. Here he uses the *Lives* as sources much as they have been used by earlier scholars, who do not interpret saints' *Lives* as literary artefacts to any great extent. Indeed, the view of "hagiography" as essentially unreliable, stereotypical, and to be ignored, has been very influential. Heffernan gives a detailed description of this view: "Medieval biographical writing, especially that devoted to the saints, has long been

⁴¹ John Ryan, S.J. *Irish Monasticism: Origins and Early Development*. 2nd edition. Dublin: Four Courts Press 1992).

⁴² Lisa Bitel, *Isle of the Saints: Monastic Settlement and the Christian Community in Early Ireland*. (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1990).

⁴³ Charles Doherty, "Some Aspects of Hagiography as a Source for Irish Economic History," *Peritia* 1 (1982), 300-28.

the butt of the positivist school...”⁴⁴ This approach to saints’ *Lives* persists. Ó Cróinín speaks of “...their incidental value as source of information for the way of life and social and economic conditions at the time they were composed,” and their “strictly historical importance in that they sometimes bear witness to the undercurrents of political rivalry that lay behind the careers of their subjects,” but slights their literary interest.⁴⁵

Some scholars have indeed engaged in literary criticism of the *Lives*. As long ago as 1974, Bieler addressed some literary issues with Muirchú, with slim results.⁴⁶ Howlett has analyzed Muirchú’s work as an example of what he calls “Biblical Style.” While his analysis is very full as far as it goes, his book does not go beyond establishing the features of the style; the implications of Howlett’s insight into the way Cogitosus, Tírechán, and Muirchú worked remain undeveloped. His assertion that the writers wrote with sophisticated artistry is transformative scholarship but he does not go further and interpret the works in their historical context.⁴⁷ Adomnán’s *Life of Columba*, recognized as the most sophisticated Hiberno-Latin literary product of the seventh century, has attracted more attention. Herbert, in her study of the monastic *familia* of Columba, reads Adomnán’s *Life* through the lens of “hagiography,” that is, as an insular expression of the

⁴⁴ Thomas Heffernan, *Sacred Biography: Saints and their Biographers in the Middle Ages* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1988), 55. See his chapter “Sacred Biography as Historical Narrative,” 38-71, for a full discussion.

⁴⁵ Ó Cróinín *EMI*² 223-24.

⁴⁶ Ludwig Bieler, “Muirchú’s Life of Saint Patrick as a Work of Literature,” *Medium Aevum* xliii (1974), 219-43.

⁴⁷ David R. Howlett, *Muirchú Moccu Macthéni’s ‘Vita Sancti Patricii’: Life of Saint Patrick*. (Dublin: Four Courts Press 2006), with my review in *Kritikon Litterarum* 35 (2008), 77-84.

continental model of saint's life.⁴⁸ In the recent collection *Adomnán of Iona*, Charles-Edwards deals with the structure and sources of the same work, followed in the same collection by Ritari and by Sharman who treat the theological sources as well as the historical sources.⁴⁹ In a series of articles over the course of several decades Picard has dealt with Adomnán's *Life of Columba* as a literary work; he has considered its purpose, has examined its structure, and has analyzed several of the miracle stories.⁵⁰ McCone and Nagy have treated saints' *Lives* in *Pagan Past* and in *Conversing with Angels and Ancients*, respectively.⁵¹ Both these scholars are interested in the *Lives* as evidence for the intellectual situation of seventh-century Ireland, viewing them variously as indicating the continental connections of the texts and the native learning of Ireland. That is, McCone is interested in reading the *Lives* as evidence for the close integration of Irish Latin culture with the continental, general medieval culture, while Nagy follows another path, seeing a

⁴⁸ Herbert *Iona Kells and Derry*.

⁴⁹ Jonathan M. Wooding, Rodney Aist, Thomas Owen Clancy, and Thomas O' Loughlin. *Adomnán of Iona: Theologian, Lawmaker, Peacemaker* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2010). In this collection, see T.M. Charles-Edwards "The Structure and Purpose of Adomnán's *Vita Columbae*," 205-18; Katja Ritari, "Heavenly Apparitions and Heavenly Life in Adomnán's *Vita Columbae*," 274-88; Stephen Sharman, "Visions of Divine Light in the Writings of Adomnán and Bede," 289-302.

⁵⁰ Jean-Michel Picard, "The Purpose of Adomnán's *Vita Columbae*," *Peritia* 1 (1982), 160-177; *id.* "Eloquentiae Exuberantia: Words and Forms in Adomnán's *Vita Columbae*," *Peritia* 6 (1987), 141-157; *id.* "Structural Patterns in Early Hiberno-Latin Hagiography," *Peritia* 4 (1985): 67-82.

⁵¹ Kim McCone, *Pagan Past and Christian Present in Early Irish Literature* (Maynooth: An Sagart, 1990); Joseph Falaky Nagy, *Conversing with Angels and Ancients: Literary Myths of Medieval Ireland* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997).

closer connection to native Irish oral culture.⁵² Scholars such as Herbert in her study of “the hagiography of the monastic foundation of Columba” have interpreted saints’ *Lives* simply as examples of early medieval “hagiography” rather than considering them in the context of the full history of the biographical form.⁵³

4. Biography, Miracles, and Words

My study will examine three aspects of the *Lives* as literary works. First, I treat their literary form, as late examples of biography in a Christian context. Second, I will look closely at the actual content of the *Lives* and in particular at the world they create for their subjects through miracles, and the saints’ interactions with secular rulers. Third, I will examine the texts by studying the details of expression, as far as the level of individual words and syllables. I shall show how each of these elements increases the authority of the text and of the picture of the Irish past it creates for its seventh-century audience.⁵⁴ Ultimately, this study will show that the *Lives* use literary strategies to create the world of seventh-century Ireland.

⁵² The divide between the “nativists” and the “assimilationists” is a long standing dispute in Early Irish studies. See D.A. Binchy, “Patrick and his Biographers, Ancient and Modern,” *Studia Hibernica*, ii (1962), 7–173. James Carney sees early Irish culture primarily as a reaction to post-Roman continental developments and is followed in this by McCone and Elva Johnston. Proinseas Mac Cana’s work placed considerable emphasis on the Celtic and Indo-European aspects of Old Irish literature.

⁵³ Herbert, *Iona Kells and Derry*, 134-50.

⁵⁴ These elements in saints’ *Lives* are a constant throughout the Middle Ages. Taylor, *Epic Lives and Monasticism* 23, comments on precisely these elements in the somewhat later Carolingian *Lives*. These elements are what makes a saint’s *Life* of whatever period and type what it is, and “[t]aking these sources seriously means not merely mining them for narrative, but paying attention to their form, style, and rhetoric,” 19.

Biography is a slippery form, to be sure, but it is recognizable.⁵⁵ When the authors of the Hiberno-Latin *Lives* chose to use the form of the saint's life, they accessed the history of biography from its Classical and late antique roots. As shown long ago by Leo, the origins of biography lie in the ancient philosophical schools which used accounts of the *Lives* of their founders to support their claims in intellectual disputes.⁵⁶ In late antiquity the tendency became more acute, as Patricia Cox has demonstrated.⁵⁷ The importance of saintly biography in the religious world of Late Antiquity is clear; that it was a significant part of Irish Christianity from the beginning is not recognized as it should be. Patrick probably brought Sulpicius Severus' *Life of Martin* to Ireland with him. The text of that work in the *Book of Armagh* served as a literary model for later Hiberno-Latin works.⁵⁸ That the literary form came to Ireland with St. Patrick is demonstrable but the implications of the fact have not been recognized in scholarship.

⁵⁵ As Momigliano recognized: "An account of the life of a man from birth to death is what I call biography," a statement that says very nearly nothing: Arnaldo Momigliano. *The Development of Greek Biography* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1971), 11. He rejects more schematic descriptions of the form, but even this minimalistic view makes it clear that a *vita* is not a history, an essay, or a novel, although it has affinities with all these forms. For the form of biography, see Chapter 4, "Getting a Life," below.

⁵⁶ Friederich Leo, *Die griechisch-römische Biographie nach ihrer literarischen Form*. (Leipzig: Teubner 1904).

⁵⁷ Patricia Cox, *Biography in Late Antiquity: the Search for the Holy Man* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983). Also, note Momigliano's words: "...biography became far more important in the period after Constantine," *op. cit.* 9. This, because of the increasing religious/philosophical competition.

⁵⁸ So Ludwig Bieler, "The Place of Saint Patrick in Latin Language and Literature," *Vigiliae Christianae* Vol. 6, No. 2 (Apr., 1952), pp. 65-98, at 70.

Patrick based much of his *Confessio* on the *Life of Martin*.⁵⁹ The elements of the biographical form that Patrick used in his *Confessio* demonstrate that the *Confessio* provided the ultimate basis for the seventh-century saints' *Lives*.

The seventh-century *Lives* are part of the tradition of saintly biography derived from the continent. Like their continental models, these *Lives* include miracle stories and prophecy. This content establishes the sanctity of the subject and increases his or her authority. It has long been recognized that miracle stories in medieval Saints' *Lives* are not to be taken at all seriously as recording actual events: they are conventional stories, meant to show that the saint acts like a saint.⁶⁰ The details of the stories are significant, though. In the Irish saints' *Lives*, as in all saints' *Lives*, the miracles are semiotically connected to events in the Bible, indicating that the saint in question is a figure for Christ.⁶¹ While the form of the *Lives* is biographical (and therefore slippery) the world in which the saints exist is a world of absolutes. Saints perform miracles to show, among other things, that they are directly connected to heaven; their power and authority are therefore close to divine authority and mediate it to the mundane world.

The third feature of the Hiberno-Latin *Lives*, their content and literary style, is distinctive, marked by rhyme, assonance, alliteration, similes, metaphor and other

⁵⁹ Patrick organizes the information about his family background and early life on Sulpicius's account of Martin. In particular, Patrick's account of his enslavement in c. 1 parallels the account of Martin's forced entry into the Roman army, c. 2.5.

⁶⁰ Argued in Hippolyte Delehaye, *The Legends of the Saints* (South Bend: University of Notre Dame Press, 1961).

⁶¹ As an example, Cogitosus (c. 8) tells of the time when Brigit turned water in to beer (for which see below, Chapter 7, "Angels in the Details." The miracle is powerful as a demonstration of Brigit's power, but is made even more so by the explicit connection to Jesus.

rhetorical elements. As in the story we have seen that deals with Patrick's encounter with Miliucc, the style is not separable from the content. Style establishes the world of the saint fully as much as do the miracle stories and visions: that is to say, the saint's world is constructed as much by the words used to form it as it is by the events described.

Miliucc's descendant will never rule, and Patrick's proclamation of that fact acquires its force through alliteration and parallelism, through its status as a miraculous prediction showing Patrick's connection to the world of eternal truth and through the presence of the story in a literary form, the saintly biography, that itself associates Patrick, the speaker of the prophecy, with all other saints who have gone before him.

The *Lives* function to give force to the actions of their subjects because biography was always a polemical form, demanding that the reader accept the picture of the biographical subject that it presents and so accept his teaching. The form, content, and style of these texts function as tools for the author to increase the authority of the religious leader on behalf of whose establishment he is writing. The saint who is the biographical subject of a *Life* written in this way is portrayed as part of the world of eternity and can therefore operate with authority in this world, with power and with prophecy. His or her ecclesiastical foundation, then, gains power from the founder's authority.

The style and content of Hiberno-Latin saints' *Lives* are characteristic of Hiberno-Latin writing but not unique in all their aspects. Hiberno-Latin literature is part of the larger world of the literature of Late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages. Roberts's

“jeweled style” forms the basis for this writing.⁶² Lapidge has labeled Aldhelm’s style from the seventh century, derived from the same insular models as the contemporary Irish writings, as “hermeneutic,” appropriately: it demands interpretation.⁶³ Lapidge defines the style narrowly as an “inclination to unusual vocabulary,” but its descent from earlier Celtic and Anglo-Saxon writers (he specifically notes Gildas, Columbanus, the *Hisperica Famina*, and Virgilius Maro as predecessors of Aldhelm) means that analysis of seventh-century literature must include analysis of verbal decoration and figures of speech as well as word choice.⁶⁴

David Howlett has written a huge corpus of scholarly work in which he reinterprets all early medieval literature in Latin from Ireland and Britain, *in toto* constituting a significant new reading of Celtic Latin literature. Howlett sees the origins of the style in the style of the Hebrew Bible, and in the Septuagint and Vulgate translations; hence, his description of the style as “Biblical.” His study has implications for our understanding of the writings as literature and their historical context: insular writers from the early medieval period are conscious literary artists and use the resources of their style to signal relationships between ideas throughout the works.⁶⁵ Howlett, though, has not elaborated the implications of his own work. My work is parallel to his in some ways; however, what I propose to do now will go much further than Howlett’s

⁶² Michael Roberts, *The Jeweled Style: Poetry and Poetics in Late Antiquity* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1989).

⁶³ Michael Lapidge, “The Hermeneutic Style in Tenth-Century Anglo-Latin Literature,” *Anglo-Saxon England* 4 (1975): 67-111.

⁶⁴ Lapidge, “The Hermeneutic Style,” 69.

⁶⁵ John Higgins, review of D.R. Howlett, *The Celtic Latin Tradition of Biblical Style*. *Hermathena* 172 (Summer, 2002) 57-69, at 68 for a fuller statement.

work in the same area, by presenting an interpretation of the stylistic features of the texts rather than merely establishing their existence. The rhetorical elements such as alliteration, assonance, anaphora, and parallelism are not just structural, but are part of the message of the texts, as the alliteration of “-s” is in the story of Miliucc.

The style of the *Lives* requires explication and interpretation, that is to say, a form of hermeneutics. This is scarcely surprising, since all of the intellectual life of the monks who were the authors and primary audience of this literature was centered on the interpretation of texts. In *grammatica*, they interpreted literary texts, primarily Vergil; in their theological study, they primarily interpreted the Bible, but also the Fathers.⁶⁶ They did not expect to read a text without having to examine it carefully. The necessity of interpretation is assumed: in many of the texts of Hiberno-Latin and Old Irish literature, people are constantly having to explain external events to others.⁶⁷ In saints’ lives, not surprisingly, the saints have to explain their visions, invisible to others who are part of the mundane crowd.⁶⁸ The writers assumed that their readers would analyze the *Lives* as

⁶⁶ For grammatical education see Brian Stock, *The Implications of Literacy: Written Language and models of Interpretation in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1983), and Martin Irvine, *The Making of Textual Culture: ‘Grammatica’ and Literary Theory, 350-1100* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

⁶⁷For instance, in the *Destruction of Da Derga’s Hostel*, there are pages upon pages of description of various characters in the battle host by an enemy who does not know them which are then interpreted by one with the knowledge. See Jeffrey Gantz, *Early Irish Myths and Sagas*. (London and New York: Penguin,1981), 60-106.

⁶⁸Adomnán gives many examples of Columba’s second sight which he has to explain to his brethren; for instance, in 3.15, Columba, “dum in tegoriolo suo scribens sederet, subito eius immotata facies, et puro de pectore promit vocem dicens, ‘Auxiliare, auxiliare.’” (“while he was sitting writing in his hut, his face was suddenly changed and he cried out from his pure heart, saying, ‘Help, help!’”). He, sitting in Iona, was reacting to one of the brothers falling from a roof in Derry, and was speaking to angels rather than

they read them: a literary analysis of the form, content, and style of the *Lives* will provide new insights into the techniques the authors used to establish the authority of the founder saints, and into the way in which the *Lives* were consciously employed as a tool in the intellectual, religious, ecclesiastical and political conflicts of the seventh century.

5. Structure of this Study

This dissertation will show that the Latin saints' *Lives* from seventh-century Ireland are effective instruments in the creation of the Irish past because the literary features of form, content, and style create a uniquely credibility surrounding the world they describe. None of these elements is unique to the Irish *Lives* of course; all saints' *Lives* are *Lives*, saints from everywhere are distinguished by the working of miracles, and these *Lives* are composed in a variation of the common Late Latin style. What I show is how they work together specifically in seventh-century Ireland with a particular purpose and in a distinctive way.

The following chapters will flesh out these general observations. In chapter 2, I argue that the political world of seventh-century Ireland required a literary response from the intellectual centers (i.e. the leading monasteries) in the various kingdoms and ecclesiastical power centers. The dispute within the church regarding the proper date for the celebration of Easter was important in itself but even more so as a marker of politico-religious allegiance. The issue of primacy in the Irish church is connected to the Easter

to his brother monks. The monks who were present naturally wanted to know what the story was, and so he told them in detail. They could not have had knowledge on their own, so his words ("Help, help!") required interpretation. Note also the alliteration of the words describing the circumstances (*et puro de pectore promit vocem*).

question, because the dispute between Armagh in Ulster and Kildare in Leinster over the leadership of the Irish church was largely fought for the ostensible reason of differing views of Easter. The competition between the Uí Néill kings in the north and the kings of the Laigin in the midlands reflects the dispute between their respective ecclesiastical supporters. Additionally, the national consciousness that was developing at the same time required that there be an accepted story of the Christian history of the island as a whole. In many ways and on various fronts the seventh-century disputes were fought with literary weapons; for Armagh and Kildare and the Columban *paruchia* the saint's *Life* was the weapon of choice. Chapter 3 deals with the place of saints' *Lives* in Hiberno-Latin literature and argues that they combine the Late Latin "jeweled style" with native Irish traditions and biblical figuring to write works of verbal power.

Succeeding chapters deal with specific literary elements of the Irish saints' *Lives*. In chapter 4 I show that the saints' *Lives* are Christian biographical writing, deriving from the form of Classical biography and participating in the biographical tradition. Earlier biographies in Greek and in Latin were often used as tools of intellectual dispute between philosophical schools, and then between religious rivals. Therefore in the early medieval period, biographies of saints became useful in the conflicts between Christian ecclesiastical rivals and their secular patrons. Chapter 5 analyses the way that Muirchú in his *Life of Patrick* uses the biographical narrative form to establish the authority of Armagh as the primatial see of Ireland, based on the position of its founder, Patrick, as the national apostle. In order to do this, Muirchú has to manage the past, writing Patrick's predecessor, Palladius, out of the history of Christianity in Ireland. Muirchú's strategy and similar features of other *Lives* create the historical past of Ireland by establishing the

narrative for future historians; as a parallel in more modern times, I include a discussion of Trouillot's account of the "silencing" of the past in Haiti. In both Haiti and medieval Ireland, parts of the past that do not fit a dominant narrative are elided from history.

Chapter 6 turns to the content of the saints' *Lives*, specifically to the stories of saints performing miracles. These stories are very common: performing miracles is what makes people into saints. The implication of that ability is that saints are intimately bound to the world of eternity, the world of God. The miracle stories in the *Lives* establish that the saints, associated as they are with specific ecclesiastical foundations, possess authority that comes from God. Their power comes from miracles of different kinds: of foreknowledge, of physical transformation, of divine power. In any case, the miracle working guarantees their connection to the divine, and validates the consequent authority of the monasteries they founded.

In chapter 7, I show that the details of the style support the authority of the saints. Rhetorical figures such as alliteration and assonance, rhyme, and hyperbaton create a world of associations within the text of the *Lives*. Details of style create a world in which saints are really a part of the world of eternity, and thus they are able to create a new reality for this mundane world with divine sanction.

The actual issues of importance in the seventh century are essential for understanding what the *Lives* were trying to achieve, and we must turn to a summary of the historical context now.

CHAPTER 2

THE *LIVES*: A RESPONSE TO SEVENTH-CENTURY IRELAND

The ecclesiastical and political changes in seventh-century Ireland required a literary response from the monasteries. The technology of writing, new to the Irish, created a new and more authoritative way of creating the past—a history, in fact—that answered the intellectual needs of early Christian Ireland. The writers responded in ways that raised the status of their own monastic communities and their royal patrons, and they did so by using all the literary techniques available to them. The specific points of conflict in the late seventh century that the writers addressed were both ecclesiastical and secular and mattered a lot: leadership of the Irish church and political domination meant revenues and power.

The seventh-century *Lives* of Patrick and Brigit and the slightly later *Life* of Columba are responses to a time when Irish society as a whole was undergoing rapid and disorienting change. The conflicts within the society emerged in ecclesiastical and political forms. The church was finally established enough as an institution in Ireland, with bishoprics, monasteries and a rudimentary parochial system that it could turn from conflicts with an earlier existing pagan society to internal conflicts of authority and hierarchy.⁶⁹ The political situation in the Irish kingdoms mirrors the ecclesiastical conflicts. The northern dynasty of the Uí Néill began establishing itself in the northwest (modern Donegal) and the eastern midlands kingdom of Brega (centered in the Boyne

⁶⁹ See Colmán Etchingham *Church Organisation in Ireland, AD 650 to 1000* (Laigin Publications, 1999).

Valley, essentially modern County Meath and surrounding areas). The Uí Néill kings, too, were newcomers and had fought to establish themselves, much as the new Christian church had had to establish itself in opposition to the pagan druids.

Muirchú in his *Life of Patrick* links the arrival of Christianity to the rise of the Uí Néill when he associates Patrick's lighting of the Paschal fire at the first Easter to be celebrated in Ireland with the rule of Néill's son Loíguire in the royal site of Tara in Brega.⁷⁰ The association is apt. Both the new dynasty and the new religion arose in the fifth century, but by the time of Muirchú in the late seventh, the events had become necessary parts of the Irish past. They were by then the foundational myths of the dynasty which aspired to leadership through the whole island and of Patrick's see of Armagh, which aspired to primacy in the ecclesiastical sphere. Tírechán's *Collectanea* also supports the primacy of Armagh. Cogitosus's *Life of Brigit* on the other hand opposes the Armagh writers, and attempts to establish Kildare as the primatial see. Adomnán's *Life of Columba* situates that saint, a member of the Uí Néill dynasty himself, in the history of sixth-century Uí Néill politics and the world of early Scotland.

In all these works the authors address the conflicts of the seventh century by casting them back into the fifth or sixth and providing a resolution based on history. However, the history of earlier Ireland had not yet been written. Their task was to create the very past on which they were relying to validate the present position of Patrick or Brigit or Columba in the Irish church, or of the Uí Néill as kings. The writers did not have only to write a new narrative; they also had to suppress inconvenient alternative pasts or traditions, handed down in various communities that told different stories. The

⁷⁰ Muirchu, I.13-21, Bieler 82-99.

authors responded to the needs of the church or the dynasty in written form. Literacy provided the propaganda weapon that was necessary in the new intellectual climate of early Christian Ireland.⁷¹ In the oral culture of druidic Ireland, writing was unknown.⁷² It is quite possible that literacy in some form arrived in Ireland earlier than Patrick; however, a textual culture that would support a community of readers as an audience for written propaganda such as we find in the saints' *Lives* required the arrival of Christianity, and not only because of the religious content.⁷³ In the monastic setting where monks were engaged in the study of grammar and scriptural scholarship, and in manuscript production, a literary response to religious conflict was newly necessary. Christian monks looked to literature for their understanding of the world.

Three issues in the public life of seventh-century Ireland are prominent in the *Lives*. In the church, the biggest dispute was the Paschal Controversy; the various monastic foundations took different positions on it, and their positions affected their power and influence. The church also was divided over the issue of ecclesiastical primacy: was Armagh, Patrick's church, or Kildare, Brigit's foundation, going to be the head of the Irish church? The two issues are connected: the two centers vying for the

⁷¹ For the effects of literacy, see Stock, *The Implications of Literacy* and Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London and New York: Methuen, 1982).

⁷² If we follow Caesar's account of druidic culture (*BG* 6.14.4), the Celts before they were taken over by Rome used Greek letters for commerce, but not for their intellectual pursuits. However, we have to remember that Caesar is describing Celtic culture on the continent, not in Ireland, and wrote a half a millennium before Patrick arrived in Ireland.

⁷³ For the likely existence of Irish literacy before Christianity, see Anthony Harvey, "Early Literacy in Ireland: The Evidence from Ogam" *CMCS* 14 (Winter 1987), 1-15; Jane Stevenson, "The Beginnings of Literacy in Ireland" *PRIA* 89C (1989), 127-65; Elva Johnston, *Literacy and Identity in Early Medieval Ireland* (Woodbridge, Surrey and Rochester NY, Boydell and Brewer, 2013).

primacy took different sides in the Paschal Dispute. The division between the northern church of Patrick and the southern church of Brigit is reflected in the third issue, that of the political leadership of the country. The Uí Néill dynasty, claiming supremacy in the north, was divided into two rival dynasties, the Northern Uí Néill and the Southern Uí Néill. They were divided religiously too, between the Patrician *paruchia* (that is, the monastic community of Patrick) which favored the Southern Uí Néill and the Columban *paruchia* (that is, the monastic community of Columba) which was associated with the Northern Uí Néill. These areas of dispute are all present in the *Lives*; we shall examine them in turn.

1. The Paschal Controversy in Seventh-Century Ireland

The most important issue in the Irish church in the seventh century was the dispute over the dating of Easter. It is no exaggeration to say that every part of the Irish church in the seventh century was affected by this controversy. On the surface, the dispute was over the correct way for the church to determine the date on which to celebrate Easter, but allegiances among monasteries, the authority of some monasteries over others, the relations of kingdoms to their local churches, and the prodigious religious scholarship produced throughout the century and a half or so of the dispute, were all affected by the position that the various actors had taken on the question: one's position on Easter came to stand for one's position on other things as well. Therefore, all other ecclesiastical disputes of the time intersect with the dating of Easter.⁷⁴ The parties to the

⁷⁴ It may seem strange to modern people that there ever was a disagreement over this issue, even conceding the fact that Eastern and Western Christianity still can celebrate

dispute, including Columbanus and Cumman, fought it out in writing. Their controversial works are the first Latin literature from Ireland, with the exception of Patrick's own *Letters*, ecclesiastical legislation, and some of the hymns on the *Liber Hymnorum* and the *Antiphonary of Bangor*. The early seventh-century works of Columbanus and Cumman provided a model for successive writers to continue the dispute. Saints' *Lives* are part of the discussion.

It would be out of place here to give anything like a full account of the dispute. The issue is quite involved and involves complex argument in several scholarly realms: biblical scholarship, mathematics, astronomy, theology, and computistics. The issue is described well and very fully by several scholars, especially Charles-Edwards.⁷⁵ It will be enough to give a summary of its background and influence in seventh-century Irish and British ecclesiastical life. The problem results from the impossibility of accurately coordinating the solar year, the lunar month, and the day because the different periods of

Easter on different days. That is because one method of calculation in fact prevailed in the dispute of which we are talking here. It was not always easy to agree on the date in the period we are interested in; modern disagreement is not about which date is correct, but about when the correct date falls in the Julian or Gregorian calendars.

⁷⁵For more detailed accounts, see Maura Walsh and Dáibhí Ó Cróinín, eds. *Cumman's Letter De controversia paschali, together with a related Irish computistical tract "De ratione computandi."* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, Studies and Texts 86, 1988); Stancliffe, Clare, "'Charity with Peace': Adomnán and the Easter Question," *Adomnán of Iona: Theologian, Lawmaker, Peacemaker* (2010): 51-68, and especially Charles-Edwards, "The Paschal Controversy," in *ECI*, 391-415; his treatment is exhaustive, dealing with all aspects of the theme. Daniel P. McCarthy, "The Study and Use of Numbers in Early Irish Monasteries," in Doherty, Charles, Linda Doran and Mary Kelly, eds., *Glendalough: City of God*. (Four Courts Press, for the Royal Society of Antiquaries in Ireland, 2011), 223-37, also gives a good summary. See also Cullen, O.M., *A Question of Time or a Question of Theology: a Study of the Easter Controversy in the Insular Church* (Ph.D. dissertation, Pontifical University, St Patrick's College, Maynooth 2007) for discussion of the biblical scholarship of the disputants and the theological issues involved.

time relate to one another differently from year to year, repeating the same relationship only approximately in cycles of either 19 or 84 years, depending on how one counts.

The story of the Paschal Controversy and its Latin literature is in many ways the story of the early medieval church in Ireland. From the time of Patrick in the fifth century through the sixth, the Irish used an 84-year cycle, perhaps that of Sulpicius Severus, which had been superseded on the continent and especially in Rome by the 19-year cycle.⁷⁶ Charles-Edwards shows that the 84-year Irish cycle, adopted in Britain, came into conflict with the Frankish 19-year cycle around the time of Columbanus' foundation of monasteries in Frankish territory. When Columbanus went to Gaul at the end of the sixth century he brought with him the Irish cycle which he defended with great fervor as superior to the 19-year cycle in his *First Epistle*, addressed to Pope Gregory the Great himself.⁷⁷ At the conclusion of his argument Columbanus invites the Pope to further literary dispute.

Let charity move you to reply, let not the roughness of my letter restrain your exposition, since wrath is distracted into error, and it is my heart's desire to pay you honour due; my part was to challenge, question, ask; let it be yours not to deny what you have freely received, to lend your talent to the seeker, and to give the bread of doctrine according to Christ's command.⁷⁸

⁷⁶ Ó Cróinín, *Early Irish History and Chronology*, 211, citing Daniel McCarthy, "The Origin of the Latercus Paschal Cycle of the Insular Celtic Church," *CMCS*, 28 (1994) 25–49.

⁷⁷ Charles-Edwards *ECI* 406. ". . . It was indeed Columbanus who, above all, who made the Easter of the Irish and British Churches into an issue of major importance."

⁷⁸ "Rescribere te persuadeat caritas, exponere te non impediatur cartae asperitas, quia ira in errorem furit et honor debitus cordi est a me tibi dari; meum fuit provocare, interrogare, rogare; tuum sit gratis accepta non negare, foenerari petenti talentum et panem doctrinae, Christo praecipiente, dare." Columbanus *Ep.* 1.10 (G. S. M. Walker, ed., *Sancti Columbani Opera* (Dublin: The Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1957)).

He is in no doubt which of the two will emerge victorious: "...and if...you wish to make this reply, that what has been confirmed by long passage of time cannot be changed, clearly the error is of long standing; but truth has always stood longer, and is its refutation."⁷⁹ Columbanus' literary disputation provided one model for his Hiberno-Latin successors including the writers of saints' *Lives*.

After Columbanus' death in 615 his continental monasteries quickly conformed to the continental custom. Rome however had become aware of the heterodoxy of the Irish and attempted to bring them also into line with continental usage.⁸⁰ Many southern Irish churches accepted the new system, but it remained a matter of controversy, particularly in the north. Accordingly, the Irish church assembled a synod at Mag Léne near Durrow in Co. Offaly in 629-30; this meeting was inconclusive, with the country remaining divided into southern and northern factions (as so often in other times in Ireland). In particular, the extensive and wealthy monastic communities of Clonmacnoise and Armagh, and the

⁷⁹ Et si...hoc respondere volueris, temporis antiquitate roborata mutari non posse, manifeste antiquus error est; sed semper antiquior est veritas, quae illum reprehendit." *Ep.* 1.12 (tr. Walker).

⁸⁰ "Misit idem papa Honorius litteras etiam genti Scottorum, quos in obseruatione sancti paschae errasse conpererat, iuxta quod supra docuimus; sollerter exhortans, ne paucitatem suam in extremis terrae finibus constitutam, sapientiolem antiquis siue modernis, quae per orbem erant, Christi ecclesiis aestimarent; neque contra paschales computos, et decreta synodalia totius orbis pontificum aliud pascha celebrarent. (The same Pope Honorius sent letters to the Irish race whom he proved to be mistaken in the observation of Easter, as we have shown above; exhorting them vehemently that they should not judge their small church, established at the farthest ends of the earth, to be wiser than the churches of Christ both ancient and modern throughout the whole world. They should also not celebrate a different Easter contrary to the paschal computations and decrees of all pontifical synods of the entire world.)" Bede, *HE* 2.19.

The Irish church had already generated opposition in Rome based on other irregularities in its discipline. Columbanus's *Ep.* 1 addresses issues of monastic discipline and episcopal celibacy and simony in addition to the date of Easter.

familia of Columba led by Iona, retained the 84-year cycle. As a result of the inconclusive nature of the synod, the cleric Cummian went to Rome to see what the custom of the universal church was and to receive instruction.⁸¹ In his *de Controversia Paschali* he reported his findings to the Irish church. Rome and all the rest of Christendom, with the exception of Ireland and Britain, followed the 19-year cycle; hence, Ireland and Britain were out of step, and were insignificant “pimples on the face of the earth.”⁸² In many ways a riposte to Columbanus, this work was also an influential part of the literary controversy in the seventh century and likewise provided a model for succeeding writers. Although Cummian addresses his work to Ségéne, Columba’s successor as abbot of Iona, one of the most significant holdouts against the new system, his letter seems not to have had much immediate effect. The two sides remained in a stalemate and, as though they were political parties, acquired names: the “*Hibernenses*,” following the traditional Irish system, and the opposing “*Romani*.”

The matter was eventually settled in England. North Britain—Scotland and Northumbria—had been evangelized from the north, by the Irish monks of Iona, and so

⁸¹ What is known of Cummian is laid out in detail in Walsh and Ó Cróinín, 7-15, “Cummian, Ségéne, Beccan.” Much is uncertain and speculative. He seems to have been from southern Ireland; he may be the same as Cuimíne Fota or Commianus Longus, himself called “an exasperatingly enigmatic figure” (*loc. cit.* 12), not least because the facts of his life are mingled with legend. In fact he was a learned scholar and author, writing the hymn “Celebra Iuda as well as biblical scholarship including *De Figuris Apostolorum* and, probably, a commentary on Mark. See Maura Walsh, “Some Remarks on Cummian’s Paschal Letter and the Commentary on Mark Ascribed to Cummian,” Próinséas Ní Chatháin and Michael Richter, eds., eds. *Irland und die Christenheit: Bibelstudien und Mission / Ireland and Christendom: the Bible and the Missions*. (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1987) 216-29; Walsh and Ó Cróinín 217-21; *BCLL* #289 (the *Paschal Letter*), #291 (*De Figuris Apostolorum*), #582 (*Celebra Iuda*) and #345 (Commentary on Mark).

⁸² (they are “... pene extremi, et, ut ita dicam, mentagrae orbis terrarum,” Cummian, lines 109-10 in Walsh and Ó Croinin).

observed the Celtic Easter. Southern England, particularly the kingdom of Kent and its episcopal see of Canterbury, was under the influence of the Frankish church. Although England was, of course, divided like Ireland into several kingdoms at this time, it was a single ecclesiastical province under the primacy of Canterbury. Celebrating Easter on two different dates in one country was untenable.⁸³ Bede's detailed account of the dispute in *HE* 3.25 gives the background and a full discussion of the Synod of Whitby in 664, convened by King Oswiu of Northumbria. The meeting decided in favor of the continental model. The *familia* of Columba in Ireland and Scotland held out for another two generations or so, until 715, but the end was clear.

We may be taken aback at the virulence of the dispute but we should not be too surprised by it. The use of the Easter cycle is actually a community issue: it is social in

⁸³ For example, in a well-known anecdote, Bede tells of Queen Eanfled, originally from Kent, who was married to King Oswiu of Northumberland. She celebrated Easter according to the custom in Kent which followed the Roman practice and ended up feasting for Easter while Oswiu was still fasting for Lent. It apparently happened several times. See Bede, *HE* 3.25: "Obseruabat autem Iacob diaconus quondam, ut supra docuimus, uenerabilis archiepiscopi Paulini, uerum et catholicum pascha cum omnibus, quos ad correctiorem uiam erudire poterat. Obseruabat et regina Eanfled cum suis, iuxta quod in Cantia fieri uiderat, habens secum de Cantia presbyterum catholicae obseruationis, nomine Romanum. Unde nonnumquam contigisse fertur illis temporibus, ut bis in anno uno pascha celebraretur, et cum rex pascha dominicum solutis ieiuniis faceret, tum regina cum suis persistens adhuc in ieiunio diem palmarum celebraret. (For the deacon Jacob, one time the deacon of the most holy archbishop Paulinus, as I mentioned, was observing the true and catholic Easter with everyone whom he had been able to instruct in the correct way. Queen Eanfled was also observing it with her people according to what she had seen happen in Kent, having with her a priest of Kent who followed the catholic observation; his name was Romanus. From this it happened several times that Easter was celebrated twice in one year, and when the king was feasting on Easter Sunday after the fast was over, the queen was still keeping the fast on Palm Sunday.)" The problem of differing observations of the most important Christian feast is clearly present. Wallace-Hadrill in his commentary on Bede (ad loc.) suggests that two Easters would not in fact be celebrated in one year, but it seems impossible to avoid in some circumstances. However that may be, there is no doubt that the dispute gave rise to disunity within the ecclesiastical and secular communities, as well as within families as suggested here.

nature since the celebration of Easter is a communal affair.⁸⁴ The bitterness derives in some measure from the character of the disputants: the main spokesman for the 19-year cycle at Whitby was the acerbic and rebarbative Wilfred of York, and Bede characterizes Ronán, another defender of the continental cycle, as a “homo ferocis animi” (“a man of savage spirit,” *HE* 3.25). Bede in the *Historia Ecclesiastica* is describing the character of the debaters at the synod, but the conflict appears in literature as well. Cummian wrote of his opponents with similar disdain: the spokesman at Mag Léne for the Irish Easter was a “whited sepulcher,” and we have seen his characterization of the supporters of the Celtic Easter as “pimples on the face of the earth.”⁸⁵

The matter did not die but continued to inform Irish and British writing for some time. In the eighth century in Britain the issue was still important. Bede, in his *Life of Cuthbert*, shows the saint admonishing his monks during his deathbed discourse to shun anyone who kept the Celtic Easter: “But have no communion with those who depart from the unity of the catholic peace, either in not celebrating Easter at the proper time or in evil

⁸⁴ See Maura Walsh, “Cummian’s Letter: Science and Heresy in Seventh-Century Ireland,” in Mary Kelly & Charles Doherty (eds.), *Music and the Stars: Mathematics in Medieval Ireland* (Dublin: Four Courts 2014) 99-110. The issue for Cummian is excommunication—separation from the communion of the universal church. He accepts the Roman Easter and argues for it. “The choice for Cummian and the Irish was between unity of the church and scientific rigour.” (110). See also Cullen, *A Question of Time*, 252: “...the organization of the calendar speaks of deeply held beliefs and is more than a succession of chronological units. It is a way in which groups express identity...”

⁸⁵Cummian: “paries dealbatus” (Walsh and Ó Croinin line 271, quoting *Acts* 23.3: “Percutiet te Deus, paries dealbate. Et tu sedens iudicas me secundum legem, et contra legem iubes me percuti?” The supporter of the *Hibernenis* position is according to Cummian hypocritical. See also *Mt.* 23:27):

living.”⁸⁶ Bede’s appeal to unity here implies that the audience for this *Life* was anything but united.

The real issue is that everyone should celebrate at the same time. When Christians celebrate the most important Christian feast at different times, the unity of the church is undermined. This is the origin of the problems for the Columban *paruchia*. In the *Life of Columba*, Adomnán appeals for peace in the context of the Paschal Controversy, since monks should remain in communion with one another. The issue was capable of rupturing Christian communities if excommunication was involved.⁸⁷ The refusal of Iona to conform was a challenge to the universality of the church; their refusal was also a statement of solidarity within their own community. They were asserting their identity as the Columban church community and would not be dictated to by the *Romani*. The date of Easter was a matter of public importance, not just the choice of individual communities.

The significance of the dispute itself was another matter on which the sides differed. According to Charles-Edwards, the *Hibernenses* thought about it as a matter of discipline, with the calculation of the date of Easter open to differing interpretations. The *Romani* thought of it as a matter of dogmatic doctrine, and would condemn the

⁸⁶“Cum illis autem qui ab unitate catholicae pacis uel pascha non suo tempore celebrando uel peruers uiuendo aberrant, uobis sit nulla communio,” (Bertram Colgrave, ed. *Two Lives of St. Cuthbert*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 283-85. Cubitt’s comments on Bede, citing Goffart, can be applied to our texts too: “...the conflicts and controversies wrought by Wilfred had far-reaching consequences and acted as an impetus to the production of hagiographies and other texts in a sort of propaganda battle” (Catherine Cubitt, “Memory and Narrative in the Cult of Early Anglo-Saxon Saints,” Yitshak Hen and Matthew Innes, eds, *The Uses of the Past in the Early Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2000): 29-66 at 45).

⁸⁷ Stancliffe, “Charity with Peace,” 64: Adomnán suggests that the disputants “...should agree to differ amicably while remaining in communion with each other.”

Hibernenses to excommunication for heresy.⁸⁸ Even more, the issue between *Hibernenses* and *Romani* seems to have been more basic and broader. The *Romani* were demanding conformity with the universal church on many levels; the *Hibernenses* were more liberal and open to local diversity of practice. From the dispute about Easter the two camps divided further on the issue of ecclesiastical primacy. Bede offers contrasting views of the two sides in England, represented by the contrasting figures of Wilfred, the fanatic denouncer of the Celtic clerics, and Cuthbert, an altogether more pleasant saint. This is the difference between the two sides in Ireland as well.⁸⁹

As monastic writings of the seventh century, the saints' *Lives* are part of the discussion, directly or (more usually) indirectly referring to the Easter controversy. In Muirchú we read of the first Easter in Ireland. This is the most significant narrative dealing with Easter from the seventh-century *Lives*; we certainly must read it with the Paschal Controversy in mind as a support of the authority of Patrick's successors, the community of Armagh.⁹⁰ Since Patrick celebrated the first Easter in Ireland, his foundation implicitly retains the correct manner of calculating its date (although Armagh had conformed to Roman practice by the time Muirchú was writing, they were still in a

⁸⁸ Charles-Edwards, "Early Irish Law," 325. The *Romani* interpretation was followed at Whitby, see Bede *HE* 3.25.

⁸⁹ See Richard Sharpe, "Armagh and Rome in the Seventh Century," in Próinséas Ní Chatháin and Michael Richter, eds., *Irland und Europa: die Kirche im Frühmittelalter / Ireland and Europe: The Early Church* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1984), 58-72. Cullen blames Wilfred's actions and statements in Whitby for the continuing rancor regarding the issue in the following century: "Had Wilfrid not become involved in the Easter controversy when he did it might have quietly died away, but opposition hardened attitudes resulting in a continuation of the quarrel for [a] almost one hundred year[s] after the Synod of Whitby," *A Question of Time*, 251.

⁹⁰ See Charles-Edwards, "Early Irish Law," 326 for Armagh conforming to the Roman Easter before 688, i.e., before Muirchú wrote his *Life*.

somewhat weakened position because of their recent Celtic stance). Adomnán is silent about Easter in the *Life of Columba* except in the beginning when he reports Columba at Clonmacnoise prophesying about the dispute and dissension.⁹¹ Perhaps there are reminiscences of the dispute in other parts of the *Life* though. In two places, Columba tells unworthy priests who have sinned that they should not celebrate Mass.⁹² They are associated with Columba's time on the mainland of Ireland, in Brega which is on the border of the two halves of Ireland. Arguably these priests should not celebrate Mass because they are heretics: they are *Romani* from the south rather than *Hibernenses* from Columba's *paruchia*. Adomnán, writing at the end of the seventh century, reports Columba's attitude being one of charity and unity, but these stories may reflect more of what the situation may have been in Columba's time, the mid-sixth century.⁹³

The Paschal Controversy is more than simply a disagreement about the theological interpretation of the Bible, or the technical components of the calendar. Rather, it is also, more significantly, a part of the world-view of seventh-century Irish churchmen and scholars; that is, of the ones who were most heavily involved in the creation of a past for Ireland. As they wrote the *Lives* of Patrick, Brigit, and Columba, the Paschal Controversy remained in the picture, however much in the background. The positions of Armagh and Kildare on opposite sides in mid-century is paralleled by the

⁹¹ 1.3: "Sed et multa alia hisdem diebus quibus in Clonoensi cenubio sanctus hospitabatur, reuelante prophetauit sancto spiritu; hoc est de illa quae post dies multos ob diuersitatem paschalis festi orta est inter Scotiae ecclesias, discordia." [But in those days, while the saint was staying in the monastery of Clonmacnoise, he also prophesied according to the revelation of the Holy Spirit; that is, concerning the dispute that arose after many days among the Irish churches regarding the diversity of the Paschal celebration.]

⁹² 1.38; 1.40. See ch. 7, "Angels in the Details," below.

⁹³ Stancliffe, "'Charity with Peace,'" 51-68.

dispute between the two on primacy in the Irish church and to the authority of the secular rulers as the seventh century drew to a close.

Because the dispute had been fought in the writings of early seventh-century Irish writers the authors who continued the controversy at the end of the century continued it in literary form. The date of Easter was an issue of power and religious authority for the seventh-century church, and so the writers of the saints' *Lives* wrote to push the authority of their contemporary ecclesiastical centers into the past. They created a written history that gained authority precisely because it *was* written, and because it established the present as being founded on the past.

2. The Dispute over Primacy

The Paschal Controversy was not the only dispute within the Irish church in the seventh century to employ literary weapons. The two centers of Armagh, Patrick's foundation, and Kildare, Brigit's foundation, fell into conflict over the primacy of the Irish church. Before this time the Irish had felt no need for an archbishop or a primatial see. Now that it became an issue, the dispute, like that over Easter, generated a war of (written) words. The competition between Armagh and Kildare for the title of primate was bound up in their respective positions on the Easter Question and similarly emerged in the saints' *Lives*. Kildare, a southern church that conformed early to Roman Easter, discovered that it was in a position to assert supremacy in Ireland as long as Armagh remained obdurately Celtic.⁹⁴

⁹⁴ See Charles-Edwards, *ECI*, 428-9, "Kildare and the Romani."

Increasing Irish familiarity with continental models of church organization caused a crisis of authority in the Irish church with important effects on the church of northern Britain as well.⁹⁵ After the Synod of Mag Léne and Cummin's trip to Rome in 631, the southern Irish churches conformed to Roman practice regarding Easter. At the same time, the Irish church learned about continental church organization which included archbishops having overarching authority over several bishoprics in their ecclesiastical province. The clerics at the Synod of Whitby discussed episcopal authority in Britain and Ireland along with the issue of the date of Easter; that meeting was all about authority and the two issues are inseparable. Charles-Edwards makes the point forcefully that at Whitby Wilfrid, by then the archbishop of York, was claiming metropolitan authority over the entire Irish church. The Irish push to acquire a primate has to be seen in this context.⁹⁶

Armagh, of course, emerged at the end of the seventh century as the primatial see and has remained so to the present. It is nearly impossible for us to imagine an Irish church in which Armagh would not be at the head; that is one of the great successes of the early literary texts that established Patrick as the national apostle. Although Patrick's position was finally established only at the end of the seventh century by Muirchú and Tírechán and the associated texts in the *Book of Armagh*, he was certainly held in high regard from the sixth or fifth century as appears in other texts. The Hiberno-Latin hymn "*Audite*

⁹⁵ See Charles-Edwards, *ECI* chapter 10: "The primatial claims of Armagh, Kildare and Canterbury," 416-40, for the following. Ó Cróinín *EMI*², 247, fn. 96, finds Charles-Edwards's view of Canterbury and York's attempt to acquire primacy in the north of Ireland unconvincing. Also, Hughes, *The Church*, ch. 11, "Armagh's claims to archiepiscopal authority," 111-22.

⁹⁶ Charles-Edwards, *ECI*, 416-40; esp. 429-38.

omnes amantes” in honor of Patrick is found in the *Antiphonary of Bangor*, a manuscript dated approximately to the time of Muirchú (680-91), but the hymn was composed much earlier.⁹⁷ It is described in the preface in the MS as “Ymnus sancti patricii magistri scotorum.”⁹⁸ Patrick’s reputation is also attested by Cummin in 631 who calls him “papa noster.”⁹⁹

Patrick’s status did not itself establish Armagh as an important place; indeed, it might better be said that his association with Armagh increased his own importance.¹⁰⁰

Armagh’s prominence, dating to pre-Christian times, appears in early Old Irish literature.¹⁰¹ The site of the city of Armagh is next to Navan Fort (Ir. *Emain Macha*, from

⁹⁷ “...probably the earliest Latin poem written in Ireland,” Ludwig Bieler, “The Hymn of St. Secundinus,” *PRIA* 55C (1952), 117-127 at 117. See *BCLL* #573, Kenney #87; the date is usually pegged to shortly after Patrick’s death in the late fifth century.

⁹⁸ “the hymn of Saint Patrick, master or teacher of the Irish,” F.E. Warren (ed.), *The Antiphonary of Bangor: An Early Irish Manuscript in the Ambrosian Library at Milan* (London: Henry Bradshaw Society, 1893), 14.

⁹⁹ “our father,” Cummin 208, p. 84, noted as “the first reference in any seventh-century Irish text to St. Patrick,” 29. Walsh and Ó Cróinín comment that “(t)he word ‘papa’ was commonly used of bishops in the fourth century, though a higher than average status seems to have been implied,” 85, fn. 208-209. Curran, *The Antiphonary of Bangor* suggests a date of “the end of the sixth or the beginning of the seventh century,” (44). On this work, see Jane Stevenson’s review, *Peritia* 5 (1986), 430-37. Some southern *Romani* were attempting to present Patrick as one of them in terms of the Easter Dispute—his retroactive support was of value (Hughes, *The Church*, 115).

¹⁰⁰ Whether he himself established Armagh as his see as the seventh-century writers claim, or later writers made the connection, the fact remains that Armagh was important before Patrick and his association with the site helped solidify his reputation.

¹⁰¹ The importance of Navan Fort or Emain Macha is apparent from its prominence in Old Irish literature, notably the *Táin* (Thomas Kinsella, tr., *The Táin: From the Irish Epic Táin Bó Cuailnge* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969)). See also James P. Mallory, *Aspects of the Táin* (Belfast: December Publications, 1992) especially 121-24; and Lynn’s important article on the ritual use of the site: Christopher J. Lynn, “The Iron Age

which the city derived its name), one of the prehistoric royal sites of Ireland. These sites were important ceremonial centers for the inauguration of kings and for other ceremonies during the subsequent reign; Emain Macha served as the inauguration site for the Ulster kings.¹⁰² In this respect the foundation of the church at Armagh follows the pattern throughout the early monastic period of founding a monastery or similar ecclesiastical center in close proximity to royal sites already prominent in pagan times. Hughes notes the ecclesiastical foundations of Killashee, near Dun Ailline, of Dunshaughlin “six miles from Tara and two from Lagore,” and of Sleatty (for which see below), all closely associated with formerly pagan royal sites.¹⁰³ Armagh’s political importance for earlier kings persisted into the Christian era and in the seventh century it was of significant importance to the newly ascendant Uí Néill dynasty who became the patrons of the Patrician community there.¹⁰⁴

That Patrick held high prestige in the Irish church before the Paschal Dispute does not mean that Armagh possessed the ecclesiastical status of a primatial see. Before the

Mound in Navan Fort: a Physical Realization of Celtic Religious Beliefs.” *Emania* 10 (1992): 33-57.

¹⁰² For Emain Macha, Chris Lynn, *Navan Fort: Archaeology and Myth* (Wordwell: Bray, Co. Wicklow, 2003).

¹⁰³ Hughes, *The Church* 76. It is also notable in this respect that Oswald of Northumbria, who had been exiled in Ireland and there baptized, established the ecclesiastical foundation of Lindisfarne in close proximity to Bamburgh, his royal seat: Patrick Wadden, “The First English Invasion: Ireland’s Response to the Northumbrian Attack on Brega, 684,” *Ríocht na Mide, Records of the Meath Archaeological and Historical Society* 21 (2010), 1-33 at 6-7.

¹⁰⁴ Hughes, *The Church*, chapter 11 and “The Church in Early Irish Society,” *NHI* 313.

seventh century it did not matter: Ireland did not have or seem to need a primate.¹⁰⁵

Indeed, the existence of any real hierarchical organization of the Irish church before the seventh century is an open question.¹⁰⁶ The early Irish church was very open to diversity of opinion, not least on the date of Easter: a central authority was not needed. Moreover, the bishops and abbots were connected to the particular *tuath*, or kingdom, where they were located: the lack of political unity among the Irish (for which see below, “The Rise of the Uí Néill”) precluded the need for unity in the church. However, the Synod of Mag Léne around 631 and the subsequent mission of Cummin to Rome demonstrated that those days were over. Ireland needed a primate or it would fall under the control of Canterbury or York.¹⁰⁷ The position of Armagh in the mid-seventh century became precarious, though. Another candidate for the primacy, more reliably orthodox, presented itself: Brigit’s Kildare.

The dispute in the church naturally played out in literary terms in the highly intellectual world of the monasteries. The sudden appearance of *Lives* in the mid-seventh century is clearly connected to the needs of ecclesiastical politics.¹⁰⁸ The intellectual world of the early Irish monasteries already contained theological works, commentaries on texts, and written *Annals*; the writing of laws in such texts as the *Senchas Már* in Old

¹⁰⁵ Hughes *The Church*, 108; Charles-Edwards *ECI*, 242: at this date in the West, archbishoprics were “rare.”

¹⁰⁶ Ó Cróinín, *EMI*² 169, presents this as the “new orthodoxy,” citing Richard Sharpe, “Some Problems Concerning the Organization of the Church in Early Medieval Ireland,” *Peritia* 3 (1984) 230-70.

¹⁰⁷ Charles-Edwards, *ECI*, 435.

¹⁰⁸ So Ó Cróinín: “(t)here were . . . undoubted political motivations behind the sudden interest in saints in the seventh century, and the emergence of rival monastic *paruchia*e in the period clearly had for a result the necessity for a ‘propaganda war’ for or against the claims of various churches.” *NHI* 385.

Irish was occurring at the same time and in all likelihood in the same monastic centers. The only form of writing that was missing was a narrative. The close association of patron saints and their royal patrons with their monastic or episcopal sites made saints' *Lives* the natural form for the disputants to use. Kildare began to make its case with several literary works from the mid-century. Thus, Ultán, the first such writer in Ireland, followed by Ailerán and by Cogitosus, the earliest Irish writer of a saint's *Life* whose work we still have, wrote their *Lives* of Brigit before Muirchú and Tírechán's works on Patrick.¹⁰⁹ The later Latin/Old Irish macaronic life of Brigit, *Bethu Brigte*, is in its present form a product of the early ninth century. It is possible that the Latin version that provided the foundation for the text may also have been composed earlier than the Armagh *Lives*.¹¹⁰ The fourth seventh-century *Life*, Adomnán's *Life of Columba*, also emerged in the context of ecclesiastical conflict, the Columban *paruchia*'s conflict with Armagh over jurisdiction.¹¹¹

Kildare's bid for primacy appears in Cogitosus' *Life of Brigit*, both in the claims about Conleth as bishop and Brigit's own quasi-episcopal authority, and in the

¹⁰⁹ Ultán: Kim McCone, "Brigit in the Seventh Century: a Saint with Three Lives?" *Peritia* 1 (1982): 107-145, and Richard Sharpe, "Vitae S Brigidae: the Oldest Texts," *Peritia* 1 (1982): 81-106. 1; *Bethu Brigte*. ed. Donncha Ó hAodha. (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1978); Ó Cróinín, *NHI* 384-85; for Ailerán, Ó Cróinín, *loc. cit.*

¹¹⁰ Ó hAodha suggests that the Old Irish text as we have it is early ninth century, but he dates the original Latin exemplar of the Irish translation to 800. *BCLL* dates the text (#353) to the seventh century.

¹¹¹ Herbert, *Iona, Kells, and Derry* 53-56. Adomnán himself, as abbot of Iona and Columba's successor, built the Columban *paruchia*'s influence in opposition to Armagh in the late seventh century.

description of Kildare itself as a site equivalent to Rome. In the Preface to the *Life*

Cogitosus makes some substantial claims about Kildare's position:

[5] (Brigit) watched over the Churches attached to her in many provinces and as she reflected that she could not be without a high priest to consecrate churches and confer ecclesiastical orders in them she sent for Conleth...in order that he might govern the Church with her in the office of bishop..

[6] Thus, from then on the anointed head of all the bishops and the most blessed chief abbess of the virgins governed their primatial church...It has always been ruled over in happy succession according to a perpetual rite by the archbishop of the bishops of Ireland and the abbess whom all the abbesses of the Irish revere.¹¹²

At the end of the *Life*, Cogitosus gives an elaborate ecphrastic description of the church in Kildare. The cathedral church was divided in halves: one for the clerics and one for the nuns. There were many relics, and it was heavily decorated, being full of gold and gems, and including the tombs of both Brigit and Conleth.¹¹³ Cogitosus's description fits an archiepiscopal see, and he makes that precise claim: "it is a vast and metropolitan city...".¹¹⁴ The display seems to have been an attempt to portray it as another Rome, filled with relics and saintly tombs, and possessed of the aura of sacred authority; appropriately

¹¹² "...de ecclesii multarum prouinciarum sibi adhaerentibus sollicitans, et secum reuoluens, quod sine summo sacerdote, qui ecclesias consecraret, et ecclesiasticos in eis gradus subrogare esse non posset, illustrem uirum (sc. Conleth)...ut ecclesiam in episcopali dignitate cum ea gubernaret...accersiuit. Et postea sic unctum caput et principali omnium episcoporum et beatissima puellarum principalis, felici comitatu inter se...erexit principalem ecclesiam...Quam semper archiepiscopus Hibernensium episcoporum et abbatissa, quam omnes abbatissae Scotorum uenerantur, felici successione et ritu perpetuo dominantur." Cogitosus, Connolly and Picard, pp. 11-12, and see pp. 5-6. In the view of Charles-Edwards, this is a claim of archiepiscopal jurisdiction over all the church of Ireland.

¹¹³ For relics, see Niamh Wycherley, *The Cult of Relics in Early Medieval Ireland*. (Turnhout: Brepols, 2015).

¹¹⁴ "maxima haec civitas et metropolitana est," Cogitosus 32.9 (Connolly and Picard p. 26). See further below, Ch. 6, on way that this section strengthens the claims of Kildare through the use of miracle stories.

so, since it was on the Roman side of the Paschal Dispute. The story in *Bethu Brigitte* 19, of Brigit's episcopal ordination may be later than the seventh century but is worth noting here. During Brigit's final profession of vows,

Then the bishop (Mel) inebriated with the grace of God did not realize what was in the book he was chanting from. And so, he ordained Brigit to the rank of bishop.

Mel said, "This is the only virgin who will hold ordination as bishop in Ireland." As long as she was being consecrated a column of fire rose from the top of her head.

That the passage is entirely in Latin rather than Old Irish may suggest its presence in the *Bethu Brigitte*'s early sources. In any case the context is relevant to the discussion of episcopal status in Kildare: the founder and patron saint of the church is associated with the episcopacy with special power, since she is a woman.¹¹⁵

The church of Kildare was growing more influential during the seventh century: "...Kildare...commanded considerable political and economic resources due to its status both as an ancient religious site and an early Christian foundation, but also because it was strategically located in the Liffey plain of north Leinster..."¹¹⁶ In both ecclesiastical and political terms, then, it became a force to be reckoned with. Of course, Kildare could only make a play, signaled by the production of the first *Lives* of Brigit, as long as Armagh

¹¹⁵ "Ibi episcopus Dei gratia inebreatus non cognovit quid in libro suo cantavit. In gradum enim episcopi ordinavit Brigitam.

'Hæc sola,' inquit Mel, 'ordinationem episcopalem in Hibernia tenebit virgo.'

Quandiu igitur consecraretur columna ignea de vertice eius ascendebat."

Bethu Brigitte, ed. D. Ó hAodha, 6 (text), 24 ("At that point the archbishop, inebriated with the grace of God, did not realize what he was reciting in his book, and so he ordained Brigit to the order of bishop. 'This virgin alone,' said Mel, 'will attain episcopal ordination in Ireland.' And as long as she was being ordained a fiery column rose up above her head").

¹¹⁶ Ó Cróinín *EMI*², 175.

was seen by some to be heretical; that is, between the 630s and the 680s, before Armagh conformed to the Roman Easter.

In a wider context, this was also the period when Wilfred as bishop of York asserted his own authority not only in the north of England and Scotland, including Iona, but in the north of Ireland as well. His claims of supremacy over only the north of Ireland has to be seen as directly relating to the Paschal Controversy. Charles-Edwards summarizes: “The distinction between southern Ireland, namely Leinster and Munster, and the northern half can only be that the south had already gone over to the Roman Easter a generation earlier.”¹¹⁷

Armagh was feeling other sorts of pressure over and above the challenge of Kildare towards the end of the seventh century. Probably as a result of Wilfred’s urging, King Ecgfrith of Northumbria mounted an attack on the Uí Néill kingdom of Brega, the most important of the northern kingdoms, in 684, pillaging and taking captives.¹¹⁸ At least to some extent the position of the Uí Néill religious center at Armagh served as a justification: Wilfred was continuing his attempt to assert the primacy of York over the Celtic areas of north Britain and the north of Ireland.¹¹⁹ Armagh discovered the necessity

¹¹⁷ Charles-Edwards, *ECI*, 433.

¹¹⁸ See *AU* 685.2: “Saxones Campum Breg uastant 7 [et] aeclesias plurimas in mense Iuni.” (“The Saxons (=English) laid waste the plain of Brega as well as many churches in the month of June”). Ecgfrith was killed the next year at the Battle of Dun Nechtain in Scotland; both expeditions were part of Northumbria’s aggressive policy of expansion. See Wadden, “The First English Invasion.”

¹¹⁹ Charles-Edwards, *ECI* 435. Wadden, “The First English Invasion,” 11: “The 684 invasion, therefore, probably aimed to establish Northumbrian political dominance over Ireland...and possibly also to make real the claims of Wilfred to ecclesiastical authority over the northern half of Ireland.”

of conforming, since that was one of the *casus belli*. “What the Irish needed in the face of such threats was an improved reputation for orthodoxy...[this is] why the movement towards paschal orthodoxy in northern Ireland seems to have occurred in just this period.”¹²⁰ Once Armagh conformed, though, it was faced with repairing the damage that had been done to its status and power, and not only by the Paschal Dispute. Armagh’s position had also been weakened by other factors. The effects of the plagues in 664-5 and 667-8, were still being felt in Armagh’s *paruchia*. Quite a few of their churches were abandoned after the plague and subsequently reoccupied by other *familiae*, particularly that of Columba, but also including Ciarán’s foundation at Clonmacnoise and, presumably, Kildare as well. During the end of the seventh century Armagh reasserted its authority.

Armagh’s response, like Kildare’s challenge, included literary weapons. The works generated in Armagh include the *Liber Angueli*, Tírechán’s *Collectanea*, and Muirchú’s *Uita Patricii*.¹²¹ Ó Cróinín makes their purpose clear: the *Liber Angueli* makes “a legal case for (Armagh’s) claims,” while Tírechán and Muirchú “staked out these claims in no uncertain manner.”¹²² In literary terms, the Armagh writers were pushing back at the Kildare *Lives of Brigit*, but they also generated pushback against themselves,

¹²⁰ Charles-Edwards, *ECI* 435.

¹²¹ There are also some minor texts associated with Armagh’s claims in the *Book of Armagh*, included in Bieler’s edition as *Notae Suppletoriae ad Tírechánnum*, *Notulae*, and *Additamenta*.

¹²² Ó Cróinín *NHI* 385 (*Liber Angueli*) and 386 (Tírechán and Muirchú).

for the erosion of Iona's influence by the reemergent power of Armagh was the main impetus for Adomnán's composition of the *Life of Columba*.¹²³

Like Cogitosus, the Armagh writers asserted their claim to primacy in historicizing terms and for similar reasons. The mission of Patrick two centuries earlier provided the basis for their claims; thus their argument had to be that Patrick's own authority established a clear line of transmittal to his successors in the 690s. It is quite true that the *Liber Angueli*'s primary focus is on the legal assertion of Armagh's position, but the statement is embedded in a narrative of the Patrician past.¹²⁴ The beginning of the text proclaims that the rights of property and jurisdiction were granted to Patrick himself by "summus Dei angelus" ("the highest angel of God") at a specific time ("quondam") at Armagh. The angel grants Patrick and his community a specific territory, extending to the whole of the nation of Ireland: "...the Lord God has given to you and to this your city, which is named *Ardd Machae* in the Irish language, all the tribes of Ireland in the form of a *paruchia*."¹²⁵ Moreover, because Armagh seems to have had relics of important saints of the Roman church (Peter and Paul, Laurence, and Stephen), it was able to assert its own primacy in the *Liber Angueli* and thus to arrogate to itself supremacy over all other churches.¹²⁶ Armagh then by implication overleapt the authority of Kildare's tombs

¹²³ Ó Cróinín, *NHI* 386; Jean-Michel Picard, "The Purpose of Adomnán's Vita Columbae," *Peritia* 1 (1982): 160-177.

¹²⁴ See Hughes, *The Church* 275-81.

¹²⁵ "donauit tibi Dominus Deus uniuersas Scotorum gentes in modum paruchiae, et huic urbi tuae quae cognominatur Scotorum lingua Ardd Machae." (Bieler, 184; c. 9, *Liber Angueli*. "The Lord God granted to you and to this your city which is called in the Irish language Ardd Machae all the clans of the Irish in the manner of a *paruchia*").

¹²⁶ Tirechán II.3.5, Bieler p. 122-23; Charles-Edwards, *ECI* 427; Wycherley, *The Cult of Relics*.

and relics of less universal saints (namely Brigit and Conleth, see above). They also pushed the connection with Rome, calling themselves an *urbs* and using similar terms like *suburbana*, and highlighting their possession of relics of the saints of the Roman church.

In the *Collectanea* Tírechán reclaims properties in the *paruchia* of Armagh which had been usurped by Clonmacnoise following the plague of the 660s. After the plague depopulated many of the dependent churches: “...they hold by force many places of Patrick after the recent plagues.”¹²⁷ Like the *Liber Anguli* Tírechán’s work asserts Armagh’s rights in historic terms. It is not that the dependent churches have submitted to Armagh in Tírechán’s own day that is the important factor; rather, that Patrick himself had established them in the fifth century. The *Collectanea* and maybe other *Lives* “may have been composed in response to earlier *Lives* circulated by rival ecclesiastical communities or *paruchiae*.”¹²⁸ That is, Tírechán writes to correct the historicizing narrative of writers like Cogitosus and to silence their alternative story. Tírechán is also defending Armagh against the Northumbrian attacks and the implicit claim of Wilfred that Patrick had not established a primatial see in Ireland.¹²⁹ Throughout his work, though, Tírechán’s technique is to create a vision of the past: he “provide(s) a pseudo-

¹²⁷ “...per uim tenent locos Patricii multos post mortalitates nouissimas,” Tírechán c. 25.2, Bieler 142. For the political context of this reference see Charles-Edwards *ECI* 254.

¹²⁸ Ó Cróinín *EMI*² 224.

¹²⁹ Wadden, “The First English Invasion,” 17.

historical or pseudo-hagiographical basis for each claim and...court(s) the support of the Uí Néill...”¹³⁰

Muirchú is no less creative when it comes to the past of Armagh and the Uí Néill. An example cited by Edel Bhreathnach indicates the way that Muirchú’s *Life* is part of the aggrandizement of Armagh. His *Life* is dedicated to Aed, the bishop of Sleatty; the dedication “...should be seen in the context of a lesser church seeking to be included under Armagh’s jurisdiction.”¹³¹ Sleatty, in the midlands, in Laois, felt especially threatened by the growth in the power of Kildare and attached themselves to Kildare’s rival. Muirchú’s *Life* was part of the process through which the lesser church was subordinated to the greater. The process is delineated in the *Additamenta* in the *Liber Ardmachanus*.¹³²

The saints’ *Lives* of the seventh century both reflected and influenced the ecclesiastical politics of the era. From the Easter Controversy to the dispute over primacy the *Lives* deal with the saints whose communities were the most heavily involved in ecclesiastical politics: Brigit of Kildare and Patrick of Armagh, and, a little later, Columba of Iona. We do not see other saints with *Lives* until the next century when the “O’Donoghue Lives” were perhaps being assembled.¹³³ All the writers of these saints’ *Lives* were of course heavily invested in this activity and certainly aware of the issues;

¹³⁰ Wadden, “The First English Invasion,” 13.

¹³¹ Bhreathnach, *Ireland in the Medieval World*, 198-99; quote at 198.

¹³² Bieler, *Patrician Texts* 166-79. There is a lot of discussion of this in Ó Cróinín, *EMI*², 174-76, Hughes *The Irish Church* 111-20, and Charles-Edwards *ECI* 261-62..

¹³³ See Sharpe, *Saints’ Lives*. Sharpe’s work has been questioned: see, for instance, John Carey’s review in *Speculum* 68 (1993) 260-62. In a generally favorable review, Carey rejects Sharpe’s dating of the “O’Donoghue group” to the eighth century.

they are all really speaking of the ecclesiastical disputes while at the same time presenting the saints as holy people. It is just as much Muirchú's strategy to glorify Armagh and the *paruchia* of Patrick by narrating the glories of Patrick's mission in the fifth century as it is to show contemporary Irish Christians a model of Christian behavior. As we shall see in greater detail below, Muirchú deliberately associated the arrival of Patrick with the Uí Néill dynasty. Like Tirechán, Muirchú argues for the Patrician *paruchia* in historical terms.

The late seventh-century saints *Lives* reflect the divisions that arose in the earlier paschal controversy. The dispute about primacy required that the writers assert the authority of the patron saints of the various ecclesiastical communities by writing their *Lives*. The issue of primatial power had not yet arisen at the beginning of the century. Once it did, the communities disputed with one another, and the *Lives* become part of the argument. In all cases, the *Lives* were written to create the paper (or parchment!) trail for primacy; or, to put it another way, to create a historical past for the seventh century present.

The writers' view of the world affected their interpretation of the political world too, since the two spheres were intimately connected. Political issues come forward as well. Patrick, as the patron of Armagh, was seen as part of the Southern Uí Néill world; Brigit, in Kildare, was the saint of the Leinster kings. The fifth-century world in which the saints had operated became important as the past from which the seventh-century present grew. The Columban *paruchia* was so closely connected to the Northern Uí Néill that one implied the other.

3. The Rise of the Uí Néill in the Saints' Lives

The *Lives* created a past for the Irish church of the seventh century. Concurrently, the writers had to come to grips with the political realities as well, and to integrate the political history of the fifth-to-seventh centuries into the narrative. The ecclesiastical centers were associated with secular rulers and states, and were thus involved in political relationships. The Paschal Dispute was the catalyst for the creation of an ecclesiastical past, but it also necessitated the creation of a political past for the country: the kingdoms were patrons of the ecclesiastical opponents.

The political history of Ireland from the fourth to the eighth century and beyond is fluid and complex; the scholarship on the period is likewise complicated.¹³⁴ Irish society when we first can discern anything about it (around 400) was tribal, but it is nearly impossible to say anything more than that. The earliest literary works, including the saints' *Lives* we are concerned with, were all written after the changes in society were well established in the seventh century and reflect a reality different from that of the notional date of the saint's career.¹³⁵

¹³⁴ The main histories all deal with the issue of the sources. See Ó Cróinín "Ireland, 400-800," *NHI* 182-234, especially 182-86; the works of Donnachadh Ó Corráin, "Legend as Critic," *Historical Studies* XIV, 23-38 and "Creating the past: the Early Irish Genealogical Tradition," *Peritia* 12 (1998): 177-208, and of John Kelleher, "Early Irish History and Pseudo-History," *Studia Hibernica* 3 (1968), 113-27, on the "synthetic historians;" Charles-Edwards, *ECI*, "The Origins and Rise of the Uí Néill," 441-68; McCarthy, *The Irish Annals*.

¹³⁵ On tribal society, see the Gearóid Mac Niocaill, *Ireland Before the Vikings* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1972), Chapter 1, "The Generations of Chaos."

The changes in Irish society from the pre-Christian period to the seventh century form part of the transformation of Europe. In the wider European world the Roman Empire was contracting, or rather, the western Empire was falling. Throughout western Europe barbarian nations were moving in to fill the void.¹³⁶ The Irish were among them, engaging in raiding the weakening Roman province of Britain in the fourth and fifth centuries and settling in the parts of Britain now known as Wales and Scotland.¹³⁷ The Irish presence among the British provided both sides in the relationship with new cultural forms, including new forms of political and religious life. In Ireland we see the effects in the rise of the Uí Néill superseding the tribal social structure, and the introduction of Christianity, superseding the traditional religion.¹³⁸

The period up to the sixth century was also a time of rapid changes to the Irish language. This is the period when Proto-Old Irish changed very rapidly into Old Irish. It is plausible to connect linguistic change to the acquisition of literacy along with Christianity, at first in the form of ogham inscriptions.¹³⁹ Writing literary works in Old

¹³⁶ There is too vast a bibliography on this; a helpful book to understand some of the details is Peter Heather, *The Fall of the Roman Empire: A New History of Rome and the Barbarians*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

¹³⁷ Notably in Lleyn, North Wales, which retains the name of the Irish settlers, the Laigin (=men of Leinster) and Scotland, which takes its name from the Scoti (=Irish) who settled in the west.

¹³⁸ For what follows, Ó Cróinín *EMI*² 64.

¹³⁹ Russell, Paul. “‘What Was Best of Every Language:’ The Early History of the Irish Language,” *NHI* 405-50; Anthony Harvey, “Early Literacy in Ireland: the Evidence from Ogham,” *CMCS* 14 (1987) 1-15; Jane Stevenson, “The Beginnings of Literacy in Ireland,” *PRIA* 89C, (1989), 127-165; Elva Johnston, “Literacy and Conversion on Ireland’s Roman Frontier: From Emulation to Assimilation?” in N. Edwards, M. Ní Mhaonaigh, R. Flechner (eds.), *Transforming Landscapes of Belief in the Early Medieval Insular World and Beyond: Converting the Isles II*, pp. 23-46 (Brussels: Brepols 2017) 23-46.

Irish quickly encouraged the creation of the medium for Europe's first vernacular literature in the seventh, eighth, and ninth centuries.¹⁴⁰

With the changes in the language came religious changes, perhaps from similar causes. Ireland converted from its traditional pagan practices to Christianity and became a part of Christendom. The various parts of continental Europe itself were facing a huge transformation at the same time from being parts of the Roman Empire to being part of the proto-medieval world of, say, Merovingian Gaul or Lombard Italy; nearer at hand, the Roman abandonment of the province of Britannia in 410 led to the formation of the first Anglo-Saxon kingdoms. As Ireland became culturally closer to the empire during its final years, it began taking on some of the characteristics of a Roman frontier area, the adoption of Christianity being one of them.¹⁴¹ It seems likely that the linguistic changes in Old Irish were related to Ireland's adoption of literacy and of the use of Latin in a Christian cultural milieu.

The most significant development in Irish politics amid these changes was the rise of the Uí Néill dynasty in the north and midlands.¹⁴² Before the fifth century Irish kingdoms were organized as peoples (*tuatha*, or tribes), rather than strictly as territories. Around the year 400, Niall Noígíallach (=Niall "of the Nine Hostages"), a king of the Connachta, expanded his realm into the north and east and changed tribal society into a rudimentary

¹⁴⁰ Ó Cróinín *EMI*² 65 (language); 65-67 (society); Francis J. Byrne, *Irish Kings and High Kings*, second edition (Dublin: Four Courts 2001).

¹⁴¹ Elva Johnston, "Ireland in Late Antiquity: A Forgotten Frontier?" *Studies in Late Antiquity* 1, no. 2 (2017): 107-123.

¹⁴² Chris Wickham gives a caution based on the lack of central political power in early Ireland: "Political narrative, however summary, is impossible given a situation of this kind," *Framing the Early Middle Ages* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 51.

state society. The earlier social organization in which kings ruled peoples transformed into a society in which kingship consisted of ruling territory, and holding sway over peoples of various tribes. Niall's rise is associated in Old Irish literature with the Irish raids on Late Roman Britain.¹⁴³ The coincidence of a waning Roman presence in Britain with the rise of a new power associated with raiding seems too pointed for accident.¹⁴⁴ The rise of the Uí Néill was extraordinarily rapid and they were the dominant power in the north from the mid-sixth century at the latest. By the seventh century, the north was under the sway of the Uí Néill. The south had a somewhat different history in which the Eoghanachta of Cashel attained dominance in a way "...parallel with (though not related to) the rise of the Uí Néill in the north."¹⁴⁵ None of the saints' *Lives* from the seventh century deal with the Eoganacht kings of Munster; they are concerned with the affairs of the north and the Uí Néill.¹⁴⁶

The ultimate origins of the Uí Néill are obscure. Our sources, whether saints' *Lives*, *Annals*, *Genealogies*, or Old Irish literature, were all composed after the Uí Néill had achieved dominance over the midlands and the north in the sixth and seventh

¹⁴³ Byrne, *Irish Kings and High Kings*, 76. "... it is noteworthy that [the sagas concerning Niall and his family] do preserve traditions (albeit garbled) of Irish conquests in Britain." Niall's mother's name, Cairenn, is interpreted by Byrne as representing the Latin Carina, and that of his father Mugmedón (= "ruler of slaves") as "an appropriate title for a successful raider."

¹⁴⁴ Ó Cróinín *NHI* 201. For Irish raiding in Roman Britain, see Patrick's *Confessio* in which Patrick tells of his own experience as one of the enslaved captives.

¹⁴⁵ Ó Cróinín, *NHI* 221.

¹⁴⁶ This formulation is true only taking the broadest of strokes. Wickham's caveat is pertinent: "... Ireland emerges into the light of seventh-century documentation as the most politically fragmented region in Europe: up to 150 'kingdoms' coexisted on the island, and this number does not substantially change in our period," *Framing the Early Middle Ages* 52.

centuries, so all the sources accept the fact that the Uí Néill were in charge. The Uí Néill, though, were themselves divided by then into two dynasties, the Southern Uí Néill and the Northern Uí Néill. In the earliest sources the Southern Uí Néill already dominate the area from the east coast near Tara, in the territory of Brega north of the present Co. Dublin through to the Shannon north of Lough Ree. In the northwest, the modern counties of Donegal, Tyrone, and Derry approximately formed the territory of the Northern Uí Néill. The two Uí Néill territories had distinct identities and distinct histories. The Southern Uí Néill from their center in the midlands extended their influence into the ancient province of Ulster, taking over most of the territory including Armagh, and in the other direction, expanded into northern Leinster. The Ulaid, the formerly dominant people of Ulster, were left with a small territory in the modern counties of Antrim and Down.¹⁴⁷

There was of course conflict between the two branches of the Uí Néill. The southern branch were more powerful from the time of Diarmait mac Cerbaill in the mid-sixth century. Diarmait was the high king of Tara in Brega, the kingship with the highest prestige of any in the country. He suffered a setback in 561 at the battle of Cúl Dremne between the Southern and Northern Uí Néill (see below). The descendants of Diarmait in the seventh century, the Sil n-Aedo Slane and the Clann Cholmáin, another pair of dynasties split from a common source, were dominant in the seventh century and later. The Clann Cholmáin divided the high-kingship of Tara with a branch of the Northern Uí

¹⁴⁷ They were a constant thorn in the side of the Uí Néill, along with the Laigin of Leinster. They were “the hereditary enemies of the Uí Néill high-kingship, and both cherished long memories of their dispossession,” Byrne, *Irish Kings and High Kings* 106.

Néill from the eighth century onwards. The two divisions of the Southern Uí Néill dynasty came into conflict with one another as well.¹⁴⁸

The early history of the Uí Néill dynasty is sketchy in more ways than one. The evidence for Niall and for his sons' generation in the fourth and fifth centuries is generally unreliable in detail and late. During their reigns, his sons such as Loíguire are portrayed as totally legitimate rulers without competition from within the Uí Néill dynasty.¹⁴⁹ Niall himself simply appears, without context, and the history surrounding him is hopelessly confused.¹⁵⁰ Kelleher's often-quoted words are apt: "The Uí Néill emerge into history like a school of cuttlefish from a large ink-cloud of their own manufacture; and clouds and ink continued to be manufactured by them or for them throughout their long career."¹⁵¹ There is no doubt that the saints' *Lives* of the seventh century were penned with that ink.

What exactly Niall accomplished is lost in the mists of legend and pre-history. His descendants, though, are very clearly in command of the northern half of the country from at least the sixth century onwards. His son Loíguire mac Néill was King of Tara in the fifth century, and was the king with whom Patrick had his original dealings, according to the narrative of Muirchú. He is known from the *Annals* and *Genealogies* as one of the kings of Tara, clearly the figure who pushed Uí Néill power into the north

¹⁴⁸ *NHI* 209.

¹⁴⁹ *NHI* 208-09.

¹⁵⁰ *NHI* 201-02.

¹⁵¹ Kelleher, "Early Irish History and Pseudo-History," 125.

midlands, i.e., the kingdom of Brega.¹⁵² His dates are unclear of course, but as the son of Niall he must have been operating in the early-to mid-fifth century. Significantly he was a member of the first generation of the family following the founder, Niall. His generation was intently concentrated on establishing themselves in royal authority: the *Lives* helped establish their authority retrospectively as the historical foundation of the seventh century world they wanted to create.

Patrick's encounter with Loíguire is the central episode in the *Life*. Muirchú is concerned to establish Loíguire as the king precisely to inflate the activity of the saint: he would be able to convert the whole of Ireland all at once, if he were able to convert the king. In Muirchú's narrative, the king admits, after seeing Patrick's working of wonders, "Melius est me credere quam mori," and immediately converts.¹⁵³ Loíguire is earlier described as "imperator barbarorum," Tara, his royal seat, as "caput regni Scotorum," and the Uí Néill as the "origo stirpis regiae huius pene insulae."¹⁵⁴ Muirchú thus establishes the context for Patrick's immediate and universal conversion of the entire country by placing it in the context of a king whose authority is (nearly) complete and undisputed.

Muirchú's narrative relates specifically to the politics of the seventh century as well. Loíguire's descendants were blocked from succeeding him in the kingship of Tara, and this represented the situation in Muirchú's own time. Muirchú reports, "...Saint Patrick

¹⁵² *AU*, s.a. 432.1-2: "Patricius peruenit ad Hiberniam...in .xu uel xiiii anno regni Laegaire mc. Néill." His death is recorded s.a. 461. See *Corpus Genealogiarum Hiberniae I*, ed. O'Brien, M.A. with an introduction by J. V. Kelleher. (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1962), 124, 131-32, 133.

¹⁵³ "It is better for me to believe than to die," Muirchú I.21, Bieler 96-97.

¹⁵⁴ "emperor of the Irish," "the capital of the kingdom of the Irish," and "the origin of the royal family of the whole of this island, nearly." Muirchú I.10, Bieler 74-74.

said to the king, ‘Inasmuch as you have resisted my doctrine and have been a scandal to me, although the days of your own reign will be prolonged, no one of your family will be king forever.’” Patrick’s activity with the earlier branch of the Uí Néill dynasty validated contemporary political realities.¹⁵⁵ Muirchú brings Loíguire into the story because of his relevance to contemporary seventh century politics. Tírechán uses the reign of Loíguire to date the mission of Patrick: “These are the latest of his miracles completed and felicitously performed in the fifth year of the reign of Loíguire son of Niall.”¹⁵⁶ Similarly to Muirchú’s (erroneous) tale of Patrick’s curse of Loíguire’s progeny, Tírechán repeats another such, of Coirpre, another of the sons of Néill:

Because of this Patrick called him the ‘enemy of God’ and said to him,
 ‘Your seed will be subservient to the seeds of your brothers and there will
 not be a king from your seed for eternity; and there will be no large fish in
 the river Sele forever.’¹⁵⁷

Tírechán immediately follows this cursing prediction with a blessing of similar tenor: in his meeting with Conall mac Néill, Coirpre’s brother,

¹⁵⁵ See Muirchú, I.21.2, Bieler 98-99: “Et ait sanctus Patricius ad regem: ‘quia restitisti doctrinae meae et fuisti scandalum mihi, licet prolongentur dies regni tui, nullus tamen erit ex semine tuo rex in aeternum.’” Bieler notes (205) that in fact Loguire’ son Lugaid was king of Tara in succession to Loguire’s successor Ailill Molt, and so the later Irish language lives except Lugaid from the curse. Charles-Edwards, though, points out that the reign of Lugaid may be fictional, inserted into the *Annals* as part of a rewriting (*ECI* 461).

¹⁵⁶ “Haec sunt nouissima illius mirabilia in quinto regni anno Loiguri Maicc Néill finita atque feliciter facta,” Tírechán 1.7, Bieler 126-27. See below, chapter “Angels in the Details,” for a further discussion of the alliterative decoration of the words *finita atque feliciter facta*.

¹⁵⁷ Tírechán 9, Bieler 132-33. “quapropter appellabat illum Patricius inimicum Dei et dixit ei: “semen tuum seruiet seminibus fratrum et non erit de semine tuo rex in aeternum; et non erunt pisces magni in flumine Séle semper.” The reference to fish in the River Sale is puzzling.

He embraced him with great joy and baptized him and set him on his throne for eternity and said to him, “The seed of your brothers will be subservient to your seed forever. And you ought to give alms to my heirs after me forever; and your son and your sons’ sons [must give] perpetual offerings to my sons in the faith.”¹⁵⁸

Tírechán’s account is both biased and simply wrong, for Coirpre and his sub-dynasty ruled wide territories which were taken over by the descendants of Diarmait mac Cerbaill by the late seventh century. As Ó Cróinín points out, “...all memories of the earlier political supremacy of Coirpre in the midlands were to be submerged in the mass of tradition centered on Loíguire.”¹⁵⁹ Tírechán supports the seventh century reality and completely elides the evidence that things were ever different.

The Uí Néill were the central concern of the seventh-century writers from Armagh, Muirchú and Tírechán, but other peoples can receive retrospective blessings or curses too. As an example, Ó Cróinín cites the Uí Failgi in Leinster (around the modern County Offaly, to which they give their name). They were dominant in their area to the mid-sixth century, but then fell from grace and by the seventh were a small and relatively powerless group. Their story does contextualize a notice in the Armagh writers: “The story in Patrician tradition that their ancient inauguration site was cursed by Patrick...was merely

¹⁵⁸ Tírechán 10, Bieler 132-33. “suscepit eum cum gaudio magno et babtizauit illum et firmavit solium eius in aeternum et dixit illi: (3) “semen fratrum tuorum tuo semini seruiet in aeternum. et tu missericordiam debes facere heredibus meis post me in saeculum et filii tui et filiorum tuorum filiis meis credulis legitimum sempiternum”.” See *NHI* 204-05.

¹⁵⁹ Ó Cróinín *NHI* 206.

a later rationalization of the dynasty's political misfortunes.”¹⁶⁰ That is to say the saints' *Life* was engaged in seventh-century political realities.

As a rule, though, our *Lives* are concerned with the Uí Néill, as the most significant political grouping in the country. The relationship of Adomnán's *Life of Columba* to the Uí Néill dynasty is of a different order than that of Muirchú and Tírechán. Columba himself was a member of the Northern Uí Néill and eligible for the kingship in his own right. As it was, he was the nephew and cousin of Uí Néill kings. Adomnán himself, like all of Columba's successors but one as abbot of Iona, was also a member of the Northern Uí Néill.¹⁶¹ Moreover, the dramatic date of the *Life* is of course Columba's sixth-century lifespan, a good hundred years after the time of Patrick and within the living memory of many of Adomnán's sources. Columba's interactions with the kings of the dynasty include his relationship with Diarmait mac Cerbaill, one of the leading figures of the Southern Uí Néill and progenitor of two sub-dynasties that ruled Brega and were rivals for the kingship of Tara, in the territory of Brega in the seventh and later centuries.¹⁶² The historical evidence for Diarmait in the *Annals* is less fully developed than his legendarium in Old Irish legends and sagas. His figure in the *Lives* likewise wavers between history and legend: he appears as a historical figure in Adomnán but is firmly part of legend in the anonymous *Life of Ruadhan*.¹⁶³ Diarmait's reign was an eventful one. He was perhaps the last pagan king of Tara; during his reign the ancestral religion

¹⁶⁰ Ó Cróinín *EMI*² 76.

¹⁶¹ See Herbert, *Iona, Kells, and Derry*, ch. 2 “The Early Successors,” 36-46.

¹⁶² The Sil nAedo Slaine and Clann Cholmain Mair. Ó Cróinín *NHI* 193; see 204 for the prominence of the Sil nAedo Slaine.

¹⁶³ For Diarmait in this text, see chapter 6, “Signs and Wonders” below.

finally give way to Christianity, but his own religious status is unclear. His dealings with saints, the monastic leaders of his time, were significant, and his dynasty remained the ruling dynasty in the seventh century.

In 561, Diarmait, the overking of the Southern Uí Néill, fought a battle against his distant relatives, the northern Uí Néill, at Cuil Dremne, near Drumcliff, Co. Sligo.¹⁶⁴ From other sources we hear of Columba being somehow involved in support of his own dynasty: the *Annals of Ulster* say that the Northern Uí Néill “per orationes Coluim Cille uicerunt,”¹⁶⁵ so it seems likely that Columba participated in the battle, presumably as a non-combatant. Adomnán’s *Life* elides the whole conflict: the battle is mentioned only as a chronological reference point: Columba went to Iona in 563, “secundo anno post Culdrebinæ bellum.”¹⁶⁶ There is no suggestion that Columba went into exile in Iona as penance for his part in encouraging the battle. Diarmait is portrayed in Adomnán very favorably. When Adomnán refers to Diarmait’s murder in 565, he calls him “totius Scotiae regnatorem deo auctore ordinatum,” strange words to use about the last pagan king of Tara.¹⁶⁷ Clearly in Adomnán’s view Diarmait is legitimately king. Perhaps Adomnán’s sidestepping of Columba’s and Diarmait’s dynastic conflict derives from a

¹⁶⁴ See Byrne, *Irish Kings and High Kings* 102-03.

¹⁶⁵ AU 461. Later sources also claim that Columba was instrumental in starting this war and was part of the fighting (albeit as a wonder worker, countering the spells of Diarmait’s pagan druidical priests), and that he was sent into exile to Iona as a direct result of his involvement. None of this is particularly credible. See Sharpe, *Adomnán of Iona, Life of St Columba* 12-15 and Byrne, *loc cit.* The legend of Diarmait’s judgement against Columba in the case of Columba’s copying a manuscript without the owner’s permission, while a good story, is unfortunately not found before the sixteenth century.

¹⁶⁶ *Secunda praefatio*, p. 6; cf. I7, a similar reference.

¹⁶⁷ Adomnán, *DVC* I.36.

revision of their relationship in Columba's own lifetime, since Diarmait and the northern Uí Néill made a quick alliance against their common enemies, the Cruithin of Ulster, and fought a battle against them in 563 at Moin Dairi Lothair.¹⁶⁸ Columba came back to Ireland the next decade in 575 for the council at Drum Cett, which he perhaps arranged. Here ecclesiastical and secular powers worked out the relationship among both branches of the Uí Néill as overkings, and the Dal Riata, who held lands on both sides of the straits in Scotland (which the Uí Néill did not control) as well as in the north of Ireland.

4. The Historical Context, Summary

That Cogitosus, Muirchú, Tirechán, and Adomnán were engaged in the political life of the seventh century should be clear. It was part of their purpose to present a picture of the past of Ireland and especially of their own area that strengthened the hand of their religious foundations and of their royal patrons.

The *Lives* do not have much in them specifically about the date of Easter or the status of either Kildare or Armagh as an archiepiscopal see, or directly referencing the position of the Uí Néill kings.¹⁶⁹ The influence is subtler: the importance of the saints' connections with fifth-or-sixth-century kings was to be found in the relevance for seventh-century concerns. In these *Lives* the writers are creating the past that establishes the seventh-century present. The *Lives* show an Ireland that is centrally controlled, even though many elements of the *Lives* themselves call that view into question. Loíguire was

¹⁶⁸ AU 563: "Bellum Mona Daire Lothair for Cruithnib re nUib Néill in Tuairscert." ("The battle of Móin Daire Lothair [won] over the Cruithin by the Uí Néill of the North.")

¹⁶⁹ Hughes, *The Church* 118: ". . .the story (of Patrick's first Easter in Ireland) was not created as direct propaganda for the Romani, to advocate their paschal dating. . . It tells us nothing about the Easter controversy except that it was a matter of current interest."

the central figure of Patrician saints' *Lives*; his position indicated the triumph of Patrick over the whole of pagan Ireland, according to Muirchú. Diarmait was the figure who was important in the final anti-pagan movement in the sixth century. In both cases the king had to be seen as centrally important in Ireland. As it happens, of course, the situation was much more local and much more complex.

In these *Lives*, Armagh is already the primatial see (or for Cogitosus, Kildare is); the Uí Néill kings are already the ones with whom the saints, especially Patrick, have to deal; the Irish church already is a unity. The *Lives* create the preferred seventh-century present because they were part of the historical dossier that solidified the position of the Uí Néill dynasty in the north and midlands, and the eventual position of Armagh as primatial see, through deploying the authority of the saints. Authority came about and was validated by literary means. The *Lives* establish the authority of the saints in the creation of Irish history in seventh-century texts because the writers chose the saint's life as their medium, miracle stories as their content, and verbal decoration as their route to meaning.

CHAPTER 3

THE LIVES IN HIBERNO-LATIN LITERATURE

1. Written and Spoken Words in Early Ireland

The seventh-century Hiberno-Latin writers who created the Irish past in written form used literary techniques that formed a credible narrative: they speak with authority. Irish Latinity is termed “Hiberno-Latin” not because it is in any sense different from standard Latin in syntax or in most of its vocabulary but because of its combination of Irish literary forms and styles with the forms and styles of Late Latin, to create a distinctive blend of the two.¹⁷⁰ Hiberno-Latin provided writers with a means of speaking with authority to an audience educated in Latin learning and also nurtured in the lore of their native land. Indeed, the two sources of literary influence combined to emphasize the importance of the word in creating reality.

The management of the past in seventh-century Ireland was a literary project that was broader than the Hiberno-Latin saints’ *Lives*. The literature of the seventh century, still primarily written in Latin but increasingly written in Irish, included a great variety of works.¹⁷¹ This century saw the composition in Irish of the *Senchas Már*, the earliest

¹⁷⁰ Hiberno-Latin vocabulary is a distinct category of early medieval Latin. Harvey (“The Non-Classical Vocabulary of Celtic-Latin Literature: An Overview.” Accessed 18 June 2018. <http://journals.eecs.qub.ac.uk/DMLCS/overview.pdf>.) briefly categorizes Celtic Latin peculiarities under the headings of :Distinctive Spellings, Late Latin Words with Distinctive Meanings, and Coinings by Celts, as well as noting the special vocabulary of specific Celtic Latin authors such as Eriugena. For the most part, anyone familiar with Classical or Late Latin can read Hiberno-Latin easily.

¹⁷¹ For all issues relating to literacy in early medieval Ireland, see now Elva Johnston, *Literacy and Identity in Early Medieval Ireland*.

compilation of Irish law, and of the *Auricept na n-Éces*, the scholarly work that gave the purported history of the Irish language.¹⁷² The same century saw the beginnings of annalistic and genealogical writing, more directly and explicitly historical.¹⁷³ The saints' *Lives* are another important form of writing that establishes the structure of the Irish past and that, with the other texts, forms part of the historiographical dossier.¹⁷⁴

The growth of this dossier comes as no surprise. As Ireland moved from being an essentially pre-literate and Irish-speaking society before the arrival of Christianity to being part of the Roman and Christian world, the prestige of the written word grew. The spoken word in the Irish tradition had great power which combined with and

¹⁷² For the *Senchas Már*, see Kelly, *Early Irish Law*, 242-46; Charles-Edwards, "Early Irish Law," in *NHI* 331-70, at 346, sees the early law texts as beginning to be written around 650, with their final form being inscribed "not...much later than 700 and a date in the first half of the eighth century...appears likely." The law texts as we have them are extant in a variety of texts, but the collection is originally dated to the seventh and eighth centuries (Kelly 242). Kelly mentions the note in the *Annals of Ulster* (*AU*, s.a. 438) to the effect that the *Senchas Már* was written during Patrick's early mission in Ireland, which supposedly began in 432. This is "clearly a later insertion, intended to link the compilation of the *Senchas Már* with Saint Patrick." Clearly the *Senchas Már* was part of the construction of the past that the *Lives* were involved in. For the *Auricept na n-Éces*, see the edition by Anders Ahlqvist, "The Early Irish Linguist. An Edition of the Canonical Part of the *Auricept na n-Éces*. With Introduction, Commentary and Indices." *Commentationes Humanarum Litterarum Helsinki* 73 (1982): 1-81. Russell in his chapter in the *NHI* dates this text to "perhaps the late seventh century" (405). See also Hughes, *Early Christian Ireland* 43-95.

¹⁷³ See Hughes, *Early Christian Ireland*, 97-162; Daniel P. McCarthy, *The Irish Annals: Their Genesis, Evolution and History*. (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2008); Nicholas Evans, *The Present and the Past in Medieval Irish Chronicles* (Boydell and Brewer, 2010); T. M. Charles-Edwards, *The Chronicle of Ireland*. Vol. 1 (Liverpool University Press, 2006).

¹⁷⁴ For the idea of a "dossier," see Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Beacon Press, Boston, 1995). Patrick Geary, *Phantoms of Remembrance: Memory and Oblivion at the End of the First Millennium* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994) discusses the medieval creation of a past based on texts; below, chapter 5, "Creating a Past."

complemented the novel power of writing. Writing became an essential part of the intellectual life of Ireland and so literary works acquired authority based on the cultural prestige attached specifically to the written word.¹⁷⁵

Saints' *Lives* report the miraculous power of the spoken word, but the power of the word is enhanced through its being written. Since books were rare, even in places where literate individuals were to be found (that is to say, the monasteries), the written word was in the first place special by its very rarity. Moreover, writing provided permanence to utterance and made words into physical things which could be held and manipulated. In the context of the Christian church this was of great importance since the books which were read, nearly all of them Bibles or Mass books, held the veritable Word of God or interpreted the Word of God.¹⁷⁶ The new conceptual possibilities, the opening of knowledge to other than the traditional keepers of oral lore, combined with the introduction of elements of the higher Roman culture, created an astounding cultural

¹⁷⁵ The literature on orality and literacy is enormous. See Marshall McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1962) and *Understanding Media: The Extension of Man* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964); Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London and New York: Methuen, 1982); Martin Irvine, *The Making of Textual Culture: 'Grammatica' and Literary Theory, 350-1100* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Brian Stock, *The Implications of Literacy: Written Language and Models of Interpretation in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1983); Rosamund McKitterick, *The Uses of Literacy in Early Medieval Europe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990) and *The Carolingians and the Written Word* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1989); Kim McCone *Pagan Past and Christian Present* and, especially, Johnston, *Literacy and Identity in Early Medieval Ireland*.

¹⁷⁶ The power of writing can be seen as magical: Aron Gurevich, *Medieval Popular Culture: Problems of Belief and Perception* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1988) talks about using book scrapings medicinally.

advance which the early Hiberno-Latin writers recognized.¹⁷⁷ Loíguire's druids were right to perceive the writing tablets of Patrick's followers as weapons; they really are weapons precisely because they are perceived as such.¹⁷⁸

Words in writing, then, were seen as a special kind of speech, especially privileged and especially valid. Tírechán describes Patrick giving books or "abgitoria" (ABC primers) to newly ordained clergy (Tírechán 37.3), and he is pictured as writing these books for the new priests: e.g., "et scripsit elementa (the letters), et benedixit eum benedictione prespiteri."¹⁷⁹ The bestowal of these elements of writing was clearly a most important symbol of priestly authority; and it clearly was a bestowal of a form of power. Priestly power and the power of literacy went together. We read in Muirchú, for instance, that the druids whom Patrick defeated in a contest of magical power are supposed (by Muirchú) to have had books.¹⁸⁰ This is not likely historically (although possible), but symbolically, the early medieval mind here finds that this is an important source of

¹⁷⁷ Druids studied for twenty years (nearly the notional time to a modern American Ph.D). See Caes. *BG* 6.13-14: "...annos nonnulli viginti in disciplina permanent" and Pomponius Mela 3.19.1 (Frank E. Romer. *Pomponius Mela's Description of the World*. University of Michigan Press, 1998, 107). While a monastic vocation was also a serious commitment, literacy provided a greater opportunity for learning. Further, Miranda J. Green, *The World of the Druids* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1997) 48-49.

¹⁷⁸"sed ferreos gladios aestimamus ad effundendum sanguinem," Tírechán II 3.1, Bieler 122; See below, Chapter 7.

¹⁷⁹ Tírechán 43.1, Bieler 159.

¹⁸⁰ Muirchú I.20.8, Bieler 94-95: the king challenges the druids and Patrick to toss their books into water in order to see whose books remained unruined, but the druids refuse. "Ait rex ad illos: "Libros uestros in aquam mittite et illum cuius libri inlessi euasserunt adorabimus." Respondit Patricius: "faciam ego," et dixit magus: "nolo ego ad iudicium aquae uenire cum isto." Adomnán attributes similar miracles to Columba: 2.8 and 2.9, which guarantees the veracity of the account by citing the testimony of "viris quibusdam veracibus." ("The king said to them, 'Throw your books in the water and we will honor the one whose books escape undamaged.' Patrick answered, 'I will do that,' and the druid said 'I do not want to come to the judgment of water with that man.'")

authority.¹⁸¹ For Muirchú and for his literate readers, power over the druids was represented by the power of books.

The power of the word in saints' *Lives* derives too from the authors' choice to use the form of biography as their literary medium. Saints' *Lives* are a type of biography; as such, they are dependent on ancient non-Christian predecessors.¹⁸² The authors chose saints' *Lives* knowing that their readers would respond to the account of a life with their expectations conditioned by the history of biography: anecdotal details are privileged, the biographical subject is presented as a moral exemplum and his or her followers acquire a reflected moral stature from the position of the subject.¹⁸³ The life of a saint adds a religious and transcendental aspect to the literary description of a life and converts the power inherent in biographical form into a piece of writing with greater authority. The function of the saint's *Life* thus became to proclaim the power of the saint and of his or her spiritual community, and also to situate the saint and his or her community in the world of mundane fact. Saints' *Lives* from the continent which were the literary models for the Irish *Lives* created a world in which the saints and secular leaders interact in the

¹⁸¹ On pre-Patrician Irish literacy, see Anthony Harvey, "Early Literacy in Ireland: The Evidence from Ogam" *CMCS* 14 (Winter 1987), 1-15; Jane Stevenson, "The Beginnings of Literacy in Ireland" *PRIA* 89C (1989), 127-65. The Irish may have been literate earlier than has generally been thought.

¹⁸² See further below, chapter 4, "Getting a Life."

¹⁸³ That is to say, their expectations are conditioned by previous experience with the form. See Hans Jauss, *Towards an Aesthetic of Reception* translation from German by Timothy Bahti ; introduction by Paul de Man (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), 88-89. Gurevich's comments are apt: "...each work presupposes a definite reading, a deciphering of it by a distinct circle of readers and listeners." (*Medieval Popular Culture*, 111). Gurevich is talking specifically about later medieval eschatological vision literature but his words might even be more applicable to medieval readers of saints' *Lives*.

present, since the authors are relatively contemporary with their subjects. In Ireland in the seventh century the case was different. By writing of the saints who had lived centuries earlier, the authors were creating history.¹⁸⁴

The power of the word to create reality is widely acknowledged throughout Hiberno-Latin literature. From the beginning of Christianity in Ireland, the word had power. No surprise: Christianity after all divinizes the Word, since (from John's *Gospel*), "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (Jn. 1.1).

In the beginning of Hiberno-Latin literature was the word, too. Patrick's writings form the beginning of Latin writing in Ireland. The *Confessio* at least is very much influenced by continental Latin writing, specifically the *Vita Martini* of Sulpicius Severus.¹⁸⁵ Patrick's text is foundational: Tírechán and Muirchú both used his work as a model and his influence spread also to other saints' *Lives*. Patrick, whose protestations of ignorance and rhetorical innocence are at least disingenuous, speaks in his *Confessio* with an authority and validity greater than that of his critics since the source of what he says is God; quite explicitly so, since he uses the Bible's own words many times as a ground for the meaning of what he is saying about his life. In so doing, he takes to himself the

¹⁸⁴ Sixth-century writers in France indeed filled in their Christian past by discovering martyr saints from Roman Gaul and recording their passions in an "act of creative memory," Constance Brittain Bouchard, *Rewriting Saints and Ancestors: Memory and Forgetting in France, 500-120*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), 214. We may perceive the origins of the Irish practice in this, with the difference that the Irish writers did nothing but historicize a past that had not been written yet; the present generation held no interest. See further Bouchard, 213-27.

¹⁸⁵ Further to this point, see below, chapter 4, "Getting a Life."

authority of the Word of God, which overcomes the rhetorical skills of his enemies.¹⁸⁶

Patrick's obsession with speech need come as no surprise since the conditions of Christianity require consciousness of the power of the word, written or spoken; it is the religion not only of the Book, but of the preacher as well. Patrick's work, coming at the very beginning of Irish literature in any language, explicitly foregrounds the power of the word. The writers of the seventh century and after followed him.

2. The Word Creates the World in Miracles

Hiberno-Latin literature is as much concerned with the fact of speaking as it is with what is actually said. The power of speech continues to be a major theme after Patrick in the stories of Irish saints. Indeed, the words spoken by saints in the miracle stories reported in the saints' *Lives* have great power to affect physical reality. In Cogitosus' *Life of Brigid* (c. 12) the actions of the saint display the power of speech. The saint, encountering a girl who was dumb from birth, asks if she would like to become a nun in her community; the girl answers aloud that she would. The significance of the spoken question and the spoken answer are enhanced by the fact that the words of affirmation are the very first thing that the girl has ever said, and that she speaks by the operation of Brigid's miracle.¹⁸⁷

¹⁸⁶ Howlett *Saint Patrick*, see especially 120: "When he writes in the *Epistola* that he is *indoctus* he is not lamenting that he is 'unlearned.' He is boasting that he is 'untaught' by men, proclaiming his status as bishop, and affirming that his authority derived directly from God." Patrick is steeped in the authority of the Bible: Thomas O'Loughlin, *Discovering Saint Patrick* (Paulist Press: New York and Mahwah, 2005), 239-44, lists references to the extensive biblical quotations and citations in Patrick's works.

¹⁸⁷ "...filiae manum retinens manu sua, nesciente illa quod esset muta, et voluntatem ipsius interrogans, utrum velato capite permanere virgo an nuptiis tradenda esse vellet

If anything, the power of the word is even more prominent in the *Lives* from the century after Cogitosus. The world portrayed in the early anonymous *Lives* of the “O’Donoghue Group” (see above, Chapter 1) is involved in the power of words. In the *Life of St Columba of Tir-da-Glas*, a boy, mute from birth, replies to a question of the saint regarding the place of his resurrection: “immediately the mute boy was joyful and he showed each of them (i.e., Columba’s followers) his proper place in which he was going to live and rise again,” after “he blessed his (the boy’s) mouth.”¹⁸⁸ A similar event occurs in the *Vita IV of St Brigid*.¹⁸⁹ Brigid is able to resolve a legal case by the power of the word. A woman falsely accused Bishop Brón of fathering her illegitimate child. Brigid solved the case by marking the woman’s mouth with the sign of the cross, upon which “her entire mouth swelled up with her tongue.” She then asked the infant “who is your father?” The child, explicitly described as preverbal (“ante tempus loquendi”) replied in a clear voice, and cleared the bishop of the accusation. Brigid thus showed the truth by her power over the spoken word.

...respondet filia sibi dicens, ‘non aliud, nisi quod tu volueris, volo agere.’ Ac sic postea aperto ore sine linguae impedimento, et soluto ipsius vinculo, loquebatur sana.” In the *Vita IV Sanctae Brigidae*, recently edited by R. Sharpe (*Saints’ Lives*), the additional information is offered that the girl remained a nun, “et multum eloquens erat” (2.92; p. 204-5). Brigid’s miracle, then, had a permanent effect.

¹⁸⁸ “benedixit Columba os eius et statim puer mutus laetus est, et indicavit unicuique ipsorum locum proprium in quo habitaturus et resurrecturus esset.” (c. 14; Heist, 228).

¹⁸⁹ 1.42; Sharpe *Saints’ Lives* 153-4.

3. The Decoration of the Word

What is said acquires greater force by the simple fact of its being written down and acquiring the prestige of literate culture, but there are other means of validation or authorization of the content of what is said. Writers of saints' *Lives* brought the history of the form into play: in some sense Muirchú's *Life of Patrick* derived its importance from its association with Sulpicius Severus's *Life of Martin*. The miracles that Patrick performed were assurances of his sanctity and saintly authority. Rhetorical techniques enhance language further and privilege the text by features of form, content, context, style, or decoration. Within a literary text, rhyme, assonance, alliteration, similes, and metaphor validate or give greater authority to what the words are saying; the function of verbal decoration is analogous to how the writers such as Patrick (see below) used the Bible to give weight to their words. Beyond the rhetorical force of individual words our texts also derive power from their explicit reference to other texts in addition to their literary models. Here is meaning in the direct citation of biblical texts: the saint is represented as metaphysically present in the biblical moment. When Brigit turns water into beer, she is not only performing a miracle similar to Christ's turning water into wine, but she is participating in the actual divine event.¹⁹⁰ Hiberno-Latin saints' *Lives* go further, showing the saints on the same plane as traditional Irish heroes by using literary tropes that appear in Old Irish heroic literature.

Some examples for Muirchú will help demonstrate these points.¹⁹¹ The account of Patrick's coming to Ireland (in Muirchú, I.13, Bieler 83-85) includes consistent

¹⁹⁰ See further c. 7, "Angels in the Details," below.

¹⁹¹ The following examples are from Muirchú 1.13, Bieler 82-85.

metaphor. Easter is approaching, the “caput omnium solemnitarum” (“head of all religious feasts”). Patrick decides to crush the “caput draconis” (“dragon’s head”) and drive a “cuneus in caput totius idolatriae” (“a wedge into the head of all idolatry”). The consistency of metaphor—Easter is the head of feasts, the dragon’s head is the head of idolatry—validates Patrick’s intention, which is the substitution of one “head” for another; the right one for the wrong one. In this case, the imagery is further reinforced by a biblical quotation.¹⁹² The context of the biblical passage that Muirchú cites operates also: the faithless in the psalm have destroyed the sanctuary and defiled God’s work, but God saves us by destroying the dragon Leviathan.

The richly decorated speech and semi-poetical phrasing of Muirchú’s chapter I.11, including repetition, rhyme, poetry (translated from the Irish), and other figured speech, is a prime example of this way of writing, and all the elements validate what is said. The new way of life brought by Patrick is predicted in the prophecy of the druids, in which the new religion is described as

trans maria aduectum,
a paucis dictatum,
a multis susceptum,
ab omnibus honoratum,
regna subuersurum,
resistentes reges occissurum,
turbas seducturum,
omnes eorum deos distructurum,
et iectis omnibus illorum artis operibus
in saecula regnaturum.¹⁹³

¹⁹² *Ps.* 74:14: “tu confregisti capita draconis dedisti eum escam populis Aethiopum.” “you have broken the head of the dragon, have given him as food for the peoples of the Ethiopians.” The dragon is Leviathan.

¹⁹³ Muirchú I.10 (9), Bieler 76-77. The new religion “approaching across the sea, taught by a few, taken up by many, honored by all, destined to overturn kingdoms, destined to

The rhyme of the participles, building to a climax in "in saecula regnatum," lends power to what is said. The fact that it turns out to be a true prediction further strengthens it.

Following right after this in Muirchú's text is the verse prophecy of Patrick's success in overthrowing paganism.

Adueniet ascicaput cum suo ligno curuicapite,
ex sua domu capite perforata incantabit nefas
a sua mensa ex anteriore parte domus suae,
respondebit ei sua familia tota—fiat, fiat—¹⁹⁴

The very obscurity of *ascicaput* and *curuicapite* shows that this is something special and important. The opacity of the verse to which Muirchú adverts indicates the force of the prophecy and demands further that the readers interpret it correctly and with authority, as Muirchú immediately sets out to do.¹⁹⁵

This passage brings up another aspect of literary highlighting in seventh-century Ireland. Muirchú explicitly notes that the source of the verse prophecy was in Irish. He says "this can be expressed more easily (*manifestius*) in our language (i.e., Old Irish)," and he adverts to the original which appears in the *Tripartite Life*:

slay resisting kings, destined to seduce crowds, destined to destroy all of their gods, and destined to rule forever after overturning all of the works of their art."

¹⁹⁴ "There shall arrive Shaven-head,
with his stick bent in the head,
from his house with a hole in its head
he will chant impiety
from his table in the front of his house;
all his people will answer 'Be it thus, be it thus.'" (translation in Bieler, 77).

¹⁹⁵ "Quod nostris uerbis potest manifestius expraemi," Muirchú loc. cit. The poem appears in Irish in the *Tripartite Life*: Kathleen Mulchrone ed. and tr. (1939). *Bethu Phátraic. The Tripartite Life of Patrick I* (Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, 1939), 338-44, p. 22.

Ticfai taillcend
 tar muir meircend
 a bratt toillcend,
 a crand crom-cend
 a mias a n-airthiur
 a thige friscerut
 a munter uli
 amen amen.¹⁹⁶

The Latin renders the Irish well enough as a rough paraphrase (although I cannot see either version as “manifestus”). The verse is a typical example of Old Irish verse. Early Irish verse is characterized by alliteration, assonance, and the general equivalence of syllable count in successive lines. In “ticfai taillcend” each of the lines in the Irish version has four to six syllables (1-4 have four, 5 and 7 have five, and 6 has six). Murphy gives an analogous example of Irish verse as it appears in heroic literature from the Old Irish hero tale *Scela Mucce Meic Dathó*, highlighting in italics the features that alliterate:

Fochen Cet,
 Cet mac Magach,
magen curad,
críde n-ega,
ethre n-ela,
err trén tressa,
trethan ágach,
cain tarb tnúthach,
 Cet mac Magach.¹⁹⁷

¹⁹⁶ *Tripartite Life*, 338-43; Kathleen Mulchrone, ed. and tr., *Bethu Phátraic. The Tripartite Life of Patrick 1*. (Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, 1939), 22.

¹⁹⁷ Rudolph Thurneysen, *Scela Mucce Meic Dathó* (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, Medieval and Modern Irish Series VI, 1935), 15. I follow Thurneysen’s punctuation and orthography which differs slightly but insignificantly in Murphy, *Early Irish Metrics* 5. Each line after the introductory line has four syllables. Note the italicized alliterations.

Translation from Jeffrey Gantz, *Early Irish Myths and Sagas*, (Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1981), 185-86: “Welcome, /Cet son of Mágu, /dwelling place of a hero, /heart of ice, /plumage of a swan, /strong chariot-fighter, /warlike sea, /fierce beautiful

The verse proper begins with *Cet mac Magach*, in line 2, which is repeated at the end in a ring composition typical of Old Irish verse. Each line has four syllables and the end of each line alliterates according to Old Irish conventions with the start of the next. The origins of this verse system are obscure, but appear to have a twofold ancestry: the “Italo-Celto-Germanic group of Indo-European...adopted a system of versification based on stress and alliteration,” and Old Irish is still in the oldest stratum.¹⁹⁸ In the seventh century if not a bit earlier Irish verse began adapting some of the characteristics of Late Latin verse.¹⁹⁹

Similar patterns occur in seventh-century Hiberno-Latin verse: alliteration across lines, syllabic equivalence, and “Irish” style rhyme, which is distinctive: Old Irish verse “...rimes consonants by phonetic classes: stops, fricatives, and resonants.”²⁰⁰ The style is of course not derived purely from Old Irish verse conventions. Late Latin poetry is a significant influence on early Hiberno-Latin writers and indeed on early Irish poetry as well.²⁰¹ What Roberts terms a “jeweled style” is behind many of the features of the

bull, /Cet son of Mágu.” For convenience of reference, I have inserted virgules to separate the lines.

¹⁹⁸ Murphy, *Early Irish Metrics*, 7.

¹⁹⁹ Murphy (*op. cit.*) gives as examples several Late Latin poems by Commodian, Augustine, and the *Altus Prosator* attributed to Columba of Iona.

²⁰⁰ Ruth P.M. Lehman, tr. and ed. *Early Irish Verse* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1982), 5.

²⁰¹ Murphy, *op. cit.*

hymns and prose of the sixth and seventh century.²⁰² For instance, the praise of the monastic community at Bangor where Columbanus studied before his mission to the continent, shows many features typical of the style. The first stanza of ten reads:

Benchuir bona regula

Recta atque divina,

Stricta, sancta, sedula,

*Summa iusta ac mira.*²⁰³

Lines 1 and 3 alliterate in *-b-* and *-s-*. All of the lines have end rhyme in *-a-*. In the first couplet the last word of the first line (*regula*) alliterates with the first word of the second line (*recta*). In the second couplet the last word of the first line (*sedula*) alliterates with the first word of the second (*summa*). The stanza is essentially a list of adjectives describing the rule of Bangor, which are synonymical and repetitive as with Roberts's examples of the "jeweled style." The verse form, though, of seven syllabic lines with irregular stress accent, is Irish rather than Late Latin.

Much Hiberno-Latin writing employs Old Irish verse conventions, particularly the *Life of Columba* by Adomnán (see especially chapter 7, "Angels in the Details"). The rhetorical decoration of Irish verse in this way leads to its name in Irish grammatical works: *retoric*, (otherwise, *rosc*).²⁰⁴ In Old Irish literature like the heroic tale cited above

²⁰² Michael Roberts. *The Jeweled Style: Poetry and Poetics in Late Antiquity* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010).

²⁰³ Michael Curran, *The Antiphonary of Bangor and the Early Irish Monastic Liturgy* (Blackrock: Irish Academic Press, 1984), 82-83; see Dag Norberg, *An Introduction to the Study of Medieval Latin Versification*. (Washington: CUA Press, 2004), 39, fn. 36.

²⁰⁴ In Murphy's view, *retoric* strictly should refer only to early "less rhythmical and often less alliterative type of verse" (*Early Irish Metrics*, 3), but the type I am describing is

(*Scela Mucce Meic Dathó*) *rosc* heightens the language. So it is with Hiberno-Latin saints' *Lives*: *rosc* type verse elevates what is said but does so in a specifically Irish way. Language in *rosc* creates a specifically Irish reality.

The creation of reality in these texts through the decoration of words and the inclusion of the saint's miraculous deeds is possible because they are products of the intellectual world of Neoplatonism in early medieval Christianity. For Neoplatonists the mundane world of phenomena is not the real world of the spirit but only its reflection. That is the sphere of the divine, and human eyes are blind to it since we are fallen in sin. Those who are close to God, though, the saints, are aware of the world of the spirit and indeed dwell in it more than they dwell in the world of physical reality. However, saints can manipulate this world by performing miracles of various sorts. The saints are not so much creating reality as recognizing it: their sanctity gives them access to the real world of the divine and so, by virtue of their holiness saints are especially believable. Many visions and prophecies, beginning with Patrick's, are given by angels or divine voices. A particularly significant angelic visitation occurs in Muirchú.²⁰⁵ An angel is reported to have visited Patrick in his youth while he was a slave taking care of swine on Slemish. The angel's departure is significant: "Another time the angel while talking to him told him many things, and after he spoke to him he ascended in front of his eyes, placing (ponens) his foot (pedem) upon a stone (petram) in Slemish. The footprints of the angel

commonly referred to by the term in manuscript *Márginalia*. In Old Irish, *rosc* is an "eye;" in reference to verse, it denotes a special way of seeing. The verse form in Old Irish is constructed of lines that balance in syllable count and rhythm, and that also rhyme and alliterate within and across lines. See also McCone, *Pagan Past*, 44-45.

²⁰⁵ 2.15 (13), Bieler, p. 82, "Aliquando etiam angelus illi (sc. Patricio) loquens multa illi dixit et postquam illi locutus est pedem supra petram ponens in Scirit in montem Mis coram se ascendit et uestigia pedis angueli in petra hucusque manentia cernuntur."

in the stone are still to be seen, remaining visible to this day.” Since the footmark is still there the physical remains validate the story as a witness to its truth. Further, the rock which is the witness (petram) alliterates with several other features of the story: the angel’s foot (pedem) and his action in making the mark (ponens).

Saints prophesy continually because they see the universe from the perspective of ones not bound by temporal and mundane knowledge.²⁰⁶ The attitude to prophecy is summed up in Muirchú I.12, where Patrick prefaces his prophecy with the phrase from the *Confessio*: “Nescio, Deus scit (I know not, God knows).”²⁰⁷ That is, his prophecy is a reflection of the divine knowledge in the spiritual sphere, which Patrick is aware of and can access through his sanctity. What Muirchú reports of Patrick’s prophetic power is a parallel to Tírechán’s account of Patrick’s prediction about the descendants of Coirpre mac Néill (see above). In Chapter 1 above, we saw the passage from Muirchú in which Patrick predicts the eclipse of the family of Miliucc, Patrick’s former master when he was a slave. The special speech of that prophecy too is valid and true and can be believed; on the other hand for Tírechán’s audience, that fact of the political eclipse of Coirpre’s family is ordained by the same power that guarantees the prediction.

²⁰⁶ Gurevich, *Medieval Popular Culture*, 53-56.

²⁰⁷ *Confessio* 24. Patrick is citing 2 Cor. 12.2-3, in reference to his own mystical experience. Like his source, Paul, he experienced a mystical vision, but he was incapable of saying whether he was in the body or outside it, but “God knows.” Muirchú’s Patrick, though, is not having a mystical experience, but rather is simply citing his source for what he is about to say.

4. Authority from Words: Other sources of authority

Prophecy is special speech since its referent is the sphere of the divine, but other modes of speech are privileged as well. The special ways of speaking that we find in the literary texts have analogues in the surrounding culture, which are relevant to the verbal decoration of saints' *Lives*. The formal speech of the Irish law courts attaches special weight to the testimony of some witnesses; some witnesses have a higher social status than others and their testimony is of more worth. If a person's "honor price" (lóg n-enech = "the price of his face" which is something like the Anglo-Saxon wergild) were high, his testimony would be accepted in preference to that of a person whose worth was less.²⁰⁸ This is without regard to the truth or falsehood of the story; their testimony had to be accepted if their worth was higher. This is called "overswearing" (Lat. "superiurare," Ir. "fortach").²⁰⁹ Near-contemporary material includes the *Liber Angueli*, where we read that the bishop of Armagh "a se recte supraiuratur super omnes;" moreover, there is no appeal from any of his judgments.²¹⁰

The Bible, being the testimony of God, cannot be oversworn: whose "honor-price" could begin to approach His? The unique authority of the Bible spills over onto other books; because they are in the same physical form, that of books, they have some of the same authority as God's Book. Further, the use of tropaic language in the texts

²⁰⁸ Kelly, *Early Irish Law* 8.

²⁰⁹ See Kelly, *Early Irish Law* 199-200.

²¹⁰ *Liber Angueli* 20 and 27, Bieler 188-89. The bishop of Armagh "rightfully overswears everyone."

themselves tends to give greater worth to the words; hence increasing their “honor price” and so their believability.

The way in which something is expressed can itself increase the authority of the meaning carried in the text. Thus, the use of rhetorical figures makes a text special. The literary decoration, in making the text richer, increases its value as testimony: by analogy, it increases its honor-price. Figures of speech (in particular the common alliteration, assonance, anaphora, and hyperbaton) lend power to the words. When Pope Gregory saw captured Angles in the slave market in Rome, he said that they were not Angles, but Angels; that the kingdom of Deira from which they came really meant they came “de ira (i.e., they were saved from the wrath of God)” and their king Aelli a figure of “Alleluia.” The pope was not making a joke when he made his puns.²¹¹ These verbal interconnections of sound and of grammar are not meaningless accidents of similarity for medieval scholars, after all, but are expressions of the deep connections between the words and the things they signified. The words actually represent their referents; figures of speech describe real relationships. These relationships do not just happen but reflect the metaphysical relationship between the things so figured. The presence of those figures also tends to lend prestige to what is said; in the first place, it reflects reality, and in the second, it must be interpreted.

²¹¹Bede, *HE* 2.1: “interrogauit, quod esset uocabulum gentis illius. Responsum est, quod Angli uocarentur. At ille: ‘Bene,’ inquit; ‘nam et angelicam habent faciem, et tales angelorum in caelis decet esse coheredes. Quod habet nomen ipsa prouincia, de qua isti sunt adlati?’ Responsum est, quod Deiri uocarentur idem prouinciales. At ille: ‘Bene,’ inquit, ‘Deiri; de ira eruti, et ad misericordiam Christi uocati. Rex prouinciae illius quomodo appellatur?’ Responsum est, quod Aelli diceretur. At ille adludens ad nomen ait: ‘Alleluia, laudem Dei Creatoris illis in partibus oportet cantari.’” See Calvin B. Kendall, “Let Us Now Praise a Famous City: Wordplay in the OE “Durham” and the Cult of St. Cuthbert,” *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 87, no. 4 (1988): 507-21.

The position of analogical, tropaic language is more complex. Tropes of various sorts operate in a text by establishing much wider similarities and relationships between the literal meaning of the text and another plane of meaning with which, by the operation of tropaic language, the text is made to stand in a semiotic and tropaic relationship. This is in other words a way of making the text say more than it does. Tropes are figures of thought rather than simply figures of speech. A trope may be thought of as an extended, complex and open-ended metaphor in which the elements involved are not limited to a single point of comparison. The writers in such a literary context expected that their audience would know what they were up to. The texts require a strategy of interpretation (that is, a hermeneutic) sensitive to the techniques of expression and aware of the nature of analogical thought. The act of interpretation itself tends to increase the authority of the text, since interpretation implies that the text is special, privileged speech and should be taken seriously because of that. Moreover, an interpreter of a text is treating it in the same way that he would the Bible.²¹²

The use made of the Bible in Hiberno-Latin literature gives a clue to how we should interpret the literary texts. Biblical commentary was a major concern of early Irish authors, as for all early medieval authors; the way that the Bible is used by other writers depends on the recognition of the meaning of passages in their original context. In the *Confessio*, for an example, Patrick often quotes St. Paul, particularly *II Corinthians*, seeing many individual points of similarity between his situation and that of the

²¹²Michael Lapidge in "The Hermeneutic Style in Tenth-Century Anglo-Latin Literature." *Anglo-Saxon England* 4 (1975): 67-111, refers to the style of our texts precisely as "hermeneutic." For interpretation of appearances in Old Irish literature, see above, chapter 1 "Introduction," section 3: "Biography, Miracles, and Words."

apostle.²¹³ By quoting St. Paul, though, and directly applying the words to himself, he makes himself into St. Paul and can then arrogate to himself all of the prestige and authority which Paul possessed. Patrick implies much more about his own mission and authority than he need say outright. This is scarcely surprising in an early medieval Christian author. All authors not only cite the Bible, but expect their audience to be familiar with the context. Patrick's countryman Gildas' words will clarify his approach: "I, after contemplating the meaning of these (sc. biblical citations) and of many other (verses) in the Old Testament as though looking into a kind of mirror to our life, turned to the New Testament, and I read there more clearly what might have been obscure to me earlier; the darkness ceased and truth shone more clearly."²¹⁴ Gildas sees Holy Writ as applicable to his own situation in late antique Britain. The meaning of the Bible is not conditioned by the circumstances of its writing, or in any sense opaque to Gildas's contemporary reader; it is clear as day, if one reads it right, that the Bible's meaning is directly applicable to the reader's present circumstances. Gildas and other early medieval authors perceived written literature, at least the Bible, as something permanent and something universally valid.

Language not derived from biblical texts can be used in this way too. More often than not, tropic ways of thinking are decorated in the texts by figures of speech. The effect of this is to set the expression apart from ordinary, mundane expression, thereby

²¹³ O'Loughlin, *Discovering Saint Patrick*, 244-45, lists all of Patrick's reminiscences of or quotations from Paul's *Epistles*. There are a couple of hundred.

²¹⁴ "Ista ego, et multa alia veluti speculum quoddam vitae nostrae in scripturis veteribus intuens, convertabar ad novas, et ibi legebam clarius quae mihi forsitan antea obscura fuerant, cessante umbra ac veritate firmius inlucescere." Gildas, *The Ruin of Britain and Other Works*, ed. and translated by Michael Winterbottom (London and Chichester, 1978), *praefatio* 7, p. 88.

making the speech itself special and specially privileged: the decoration validates what is said. In combination with the realization that figures of speech are intended to refer to a reality outside of themselves, figures of speech turn into figures of thought. Alliteration connecting several words connects the ideas expressed as well, and indicates their participation in a higher, supramundane reality. Alliteration becomes trope: Muirchú's words "semen...seruiet in sempiternum," which we saw above in Chapter 1, associate the ideas of subservience, descent from Coirpre, and perpetuity into a single idea.

The view of the literal content of the text as being included in another plane of reality came very easily to people of the early medieval period like Gregory, Gildas, and Muirchú. They were without exception all conditioned by the prevailing philosophical and theological understanding of reality. The mundane world was seen as the image of a truer, unseen, reality which is superior to and interpenetrates this world. It is the field of the divine, and so saints in particular are especially close to it. In literary terms, the unseen reality forms a plane of meaning to which the world of appearances (i.e., the world of linguistic phenomena in a literary sense) relates, both in large and small particulars. That is, the minuscule features of style and writing, the figures of speech as minute as alliteration and assonance, relate to the real world of transcendence; they express something of that divine plane. As far as our early medieval authors are concerned, everything is one and everything reflects ultimate reality.

5. Literary Power in the Saints' *Lives*

The writers of the seventh-century Irish saints' *Lives* wrote as part of the intellectual project of establishing a history for Ireland, contemporary with the production

of other works of similar purpose: *Annals* and *Genealogies* and the legal and linguistic dossiers of the *Senchas Már* and the *Auraicept na n-Éces*.²¹⁵ While the *Lives* are of course primarily religious documents and intended to edify their monastic readers, they also participated in the construction of a past for the Irish church.

Cogitosus, Muirchú, Tírechán, and Adomnán, and their predecessors, chose the saint's *Life* as the form for their work for specific reasons. The saint's *Life* elevated the authority of the monastery or church associated with its subject, and of the secular rulers associated with individual monasteries. The content of the *Lives* is also significant: saints' *Lives* from all parts of the early medieval world all include plenty of miracle stories at all times, and the miracles tend to be the same for all of the saints. However, simply because they are boilerplate does not mean that they should not be taken seriously: the stories have a meaning in these *Lives* and their content is functional. The seventh-century writers chose also to use an elaborate and highly figured style to tell the story of the saints. This style connects the saints and their actions to divine reality and confers authority on the narrative of the *Lives* not only in religious terms, but also in their accounts of the history. From the form, contents, and style, then, the writers of these saints' *Lives* construct their version of the Irish past.

The following chapters will discuss these assertions in detail. Chapter 4 "Getting a Life" discusses the form of the saint's *Life*, its literary history deriving from ancient biography, and the way it is used in early medieval Francia and early Ireland. The seventh-century writers made some significant changes to the form as they received it from the continent, using it to access the past in a new way, and associating the actions of

²¹⁵ Above, 76-77.

the saints with native heroes of the Irish tradition. Chapter 5, “Creating A Past,” tells of the ways in which the *Lives* manage the past, using the example of Palladius. He was a Christian bishop sent to Ireland before Patrick, but Muirchú and the other writers elide his mission from their account of Patrick’s. I argue that the management of the past was deliberate and that the *Lives* are as important in the development of early Irish history as the “pseudo-historians.” The following chapter, chapter 6, “Signs and Wonders,” argues that the miraculous contents of the *Lives* form the narrative core of the saints’ power in their creation of the past in seventh-century Ireland. Chapter 7, “Angels in the Details,” gets down to the specifics of the style, and argues that the style that Hiberno-Latin writers employed to create authority for the texts originated at the beginning of the century in the Paschal Dispute. In their turn, the seventh-century Irish authors of saints’ *Lives* likewise created authority for their works and so established the Irish past through literary means.

CHAPTER 4

GETTING A LIFE: SAINTS' LIVES AND HISTORICAL DOSSIER

1. Saint's *Lives* in Early Ireland

Seventh-century Irish churchmen needed literary weapons in their disputes and found them in saintly biographies. Such *Lives* were an appropriate medium because of the long tradition of using biography in ideological conflict from as early as the Hellenistic age.²¹⁶ Early medieval saints' *Lives* were available for imitation by the Irish writers because of the increased contacts between Ireland and Merovingian Francia. The seventh-century Hiberno-Latin writers, Muirchú, Tírechán, and Cogitosus, and their predecessors used *Lives* of saints written in Merovingian Francia as their literary model, because the Merovingian writers provided the Irish writers with a way of using saints' *Lives* as an intellectual tool to create a historical narrative that would support the political and ecclesiastical power structure of seventh-century Ireland. However, the needs of the seventh-century Irish writers were different from the needs of their continental

²¹⁶ The fundamental work is Fr. Leo, *Die griechisch-römische Biographie nach ihrer literarischen Form* (Leipzig: Teubner 1904). More recent, but still some decades old, is Arnaldo Momigliano's *The Development of Greek Biography* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1971). Momigliano is primarily concerned with the origins of biography in Classical philosophical contexts. Patricia Cox, *Biography in Late Antiquity: the Search for the Holy Man* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983) studies the way in which biography is used in Late Antiquity to present philosophical heroes as models for behavior. See also Gillian Clark's article on philosophical biography in Tomas Hägg and Philip Rousseau, *Greek Biography and Panegyric in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000): "Philosophic Lives and the Philosophic Life: Porphyry and Iamblichus," 29-51. The life of the philosopher is presented in philosophical lives as a model to be imitated by the reader.

exemplars. In Ireland the *Lives* functioned differently. Rather than dwelling on the sanctity of contemporary or recent saints as in Francia, the Irish writers needed saints who had established a new order in society, both ecclesiastical and secular, in the more distant past when the foundation of the seventh-century power structure was just emerging. Saints' *Lives* were important instruments in the creation of the past.

Saints' *Lives*, which became one of the characteristic products of Irish medieval literature, were not a part of Hiberno-Latin literature before the mid-seventh century. Their emergence in Ireland demands an explanation that relates the writing of saints' *Lives* to other literary and intellectual developments. The biographies I will examine in this chapter include the earliest examples of saintly biography in Ireland: the work of Cogitosus on Brigit and the works of the two writers that appears in the *Book of Armagh*, Tírechán and especially Muirchú on Patrick. The work of the other identifiably seventh-century *Life*, Adomnán's *Life of Columba*, is the latest of the *Lives* to be written and so comes after the pioneering earlier works; discussion of Adomnán in this context adds nothing to our understanding of the novel use of the form.

Management of the past dominated the Irish and the continental literary scenes, each an emerging early medieval society. In Ireland, the seventh century saw the development of *Annals* and *Genealogies* and the beginning of the writing of native Irish lore ("*senchas*") in monastic centers. Meanwhile on the continent, writers in Merovingian Francia were writing *Lives* of contemporary saints.²¹⁷ The Merovingian writers wrote to

²¹⁷ The early medieval saints' *Lives* from Ireland and the continent form a considerable body of literature. In Ireland, the literary sources include texts described in greater detail in Chapter 1, above. Continental *Lives* from Francia include *Lives* collected in *MGH SS. rer. meroving.*, in a series of five volumes (*Passiones vitaeque sanctorum aevi Merovingici I-V*). Several of the most important have been translated with extensive

elevate the reputation of Frankish royalty and nobility; the Irish intelligentsia constructed a past for their country in history and legend in the Irish language. The Irish writers of Latin saints' *Lives* participated in both intellectual worlds. They were as involved in the church of north-western Europe as the French ecclesiastics, and were as much members of the Irish intelligentsia as the authors of the vernacular literature. In both ways then, they contributed to the creation of an understanding of their past.²¹⁸

The three extant pieces of writing about Irish saints that are indisputably the products of the seventh century, namely the works of Cogitosus, Tírechán, and Muirchú, were not in fact the earliest saints' *Lives* that Irish scholars wrote. Muirchú specifically refers to several earlier examples as his predecessors and models; however, those works have been lost. We know from several literary sources that Ultán (ob. 661) and Ailerán (ob. 665) wrote *Lives* of Brigit before Cogitosus and that they both followed Columba in writing about Patrick.²¹⁹ Recent research has discovered other texts that are arguably products of an earlier decade in the same century. The *Vita Prima Sanctae Brigidae*, identified by Howlett as the work of Ailerán, is extant without a preface like those of Cogitosus, Muirchú, and Adomnán, to indicate its author, recipient, or literary and

discussion in Paul Fouracre and Richard A. Gerberding. *Late Merovingian France: History and Hagiography 640-720* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1996).

²¹⁸ See McCone *Pagan Past*, Chapter 1, especially 24, for the unity of the intellectual class. The Irish learned class was a unity. Centered in monastic centers its members were all related by blood or marriage to one another and to the political and legal elites. See Donnachadh Ó Corráin, "Creating the Past: the Early Irish Genealogical Tradition," *Peritia* 12 (1998): 177-208 and Edel Bhreathnach, "The Tradition of Writing History in Medieval Ireland," in *Ireland in the Medieval World, AD 400-1000: Landscape, Kingship and Religion* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2014), 1-8.

²¹⁹ Ó Cróinín, *NHI* 384.

devotional purpose.²²⁰ The *Life of Molua (Lugidius)* from the *Codex Salmanticensis*, is identified by Byrne as the work of Laidcenn.²²¹ These two *Lives* are also works of the seventh century, in essence, if we accept the identifications, but Howlett's and Byrne's identifications have not received universal acceptance. It is also likely that Columba's successor Cumméne (ob. 669) wrote his *Liber de uirtutibus sancti Columbae* at Iona at around this time.²²² This text is also lost. Richard Sharpe's identification of a section of the collection of early Irish saints' *Lives* in the *Codex Salmanticensis* (including the *Life of Molua* discussed by Byrne) as the "O'Donoghue Group" or the Dublin Collection, dated to the eighth century, is uncertain. If he is right in his identification, the utility of these texts for the present study is unclear: they are in a condition like that of the *Uita Prima Sanctae Brigidae* in that they do not identify their authors, recipients, or purpose. There may be genuine early material remaining here, but it is, to date, unrecoverable.

While all of these works are *Lives* of the saints, they present themselves in a variety of ways: the use of the term "hagiography" for these works and works like them is problematic.²²³ The manuscripts of the Irish texts certainly do not call them "hagiography," since that is a term of modern scholarship. The generic description given for the texts differs, when it is even extant: of the certainly or putatively seventh-century works, only the *Uita* of Lugaid/Molua appears in the MS explicitly as a *uita* but the text

²²⁰ David Howlett, "Vita I Sanctae Brigidae," *Peritia* 12 (1998): 1-23.

²²¹ Paul Byrne, "Life of St. Molua: date and authorship," *Peritia* 24-25 (2013-140: 90-107. Text in Heist, 131-45.

²²² Herbert, *Iona, Kells, and Derry* 24-5.

²²³ Lifshitz, "Beyond Positivism and Genre" and Anna Taylor, "Hagiography and Early Medieval History," *Religion Compass* 7/1 (2013): 1-14.

was edited into its present form no earlier than the eighth century: the manuscript itself is an even later reworking of the fourteenth century.²²⁴ We cannot be certain that the original author in the seventh century used that title. Tírechán's work is commonly referred to as *Collectanea*, a title found indeed in the manuscript; however, Bieler comments, "[t]his is a prefatory note, added by an editor ... [t]he work has no title ..."²²⁵ Translators and other scholars call Muirchú's work a "*Life*" but he himself calls it "*pauca de sancti Patricii peritia et uirtutibus*."²²⁶ The *Uita Prima sanctae Brigidae* has no introductory material; Cogitosus' preface to his work says that he is writing "*sanctae et beatae memoriae Brigidae uirginis uirtutes et miracula*."²²⁷ Nowhere do we see an indisputable definition of these works as *Uitae* or *Lives*. It is true that Muirchú and Cogitosus explicitly reference the miracles of the saints in their prefaces ("uirtutes" has that meaning); nonetheless, each of the Irish writings (with the exception of Tírechán's account of Patrick's activity of foundation of churches throughout Ireland) is structured as a "*Life*" beginning with the birth of the subject, including his or her deeds, and concluding with his or her death. Clearly these texts are in the tradition of biographical writing, broadly so conceived, from Late Antiquity that includes Athanasius' *Life of Anthony* and Sulpicius Severus' *Life of Martin*.

²²⁴ See Kenney, #114, page 304-05.

²²⁵ Bieler, *Patrician Texts*, 215, s.v. "Heading."

²²⁶ *ibid.* 66; Bieler translates this as "(t)hese few details concerning the tradition of holy Patrick and his miracles" (67). The text of the Brussels prologue does use the term "*uita*;" "*incipit prologus de uita sancti Patricii confessoris*," Bieler 62-63. In any case, the Brussels MS dates from the eleventh century and is based on an incomplete exemplar: Bieler, 3-4.

²²⁷ "the virtues and miracles of Brigit the virgin of holy and blessed memory," *Prologus*, PL 775-776; Connolly and Picard 11.

The saint's *uita* was not an important form of literature in early-to-mid-seventh-century Ireland before Ultán and Ailerán were writing. The major genres of Latin writings appear in the categories of the *Bibliography of Celtic Latin Literature (BCLL)*.²²⁸ In the *BCCL*, Lapidge and Sharpe identify only the works of Cogitosus and the other versions of the *Life of Brigit* (confused as the history of the saints' *Lives* of Brigit is), Muirchú, and Tírechán (along with associated hagiographical fragments from the *Book of Armagh*) as "hagiography" from the seventh century and they are all datable to the later part of the century. The several other *Lives* which we have identified above might add considerably to the *corpus* of putatively seventh-century saints' *Lives*, but they do not begin to rival work in other forms like biblical and grammatical scholarship, theology, ecclesiastical legislation, computistical texts, and hymns. Saints' *Lives* are relatively rare, and were not the first choice for Hiberno-Latin authors.

The generation of authors who died in the mid-600s (perhaps in the plague; see *AU s.a.* 664-5 and 667-8) began the literary tradition of saints' *Lives* in Ireland. Most of their work has been lost or is unrecognizable as such if it is hiding in the "O'Donoghue *Lives*." In any case, what may still exist tells us nothing about the purpose in writing *Lives*, in particular or in general. The impulse of the Irish to take up such writing all of a sudden in the mid-seventh century is obscure and begs for an explanation.

The idea of a saint's *Life* was not a complete novelty. At least Sulpicius Severus' *Life of Martin* was available in Ireland from the time of Patrick, who used it as the model for his *Confession*.²²⁹ In the *Life of Martin* we have a very Christian interpretation of

²²⁸ See *BCLL*, pages 77-162.

²²⁹ See Stancliffe, *Martin*. I have shown that Patrick's *Confessio* depends to some extent on Sulpicius Severus's biography of Martin in my unpublished paper "Patrick's

ancient biography in a late Imperial context with considerable influence on later saints' *Lives*, particularly in Ireland and England. It is quite clear that in many respects the seventh-century Irish writers of saints' *Lives* and their early Anglo-Saxon counterparts (including Bede in his *Historia Ecclesiastica*) followed the model of Sulpicius very closely. The seventh-century Irish were in close contact with the continent (see Chapter 2 above on the Paschal Controversy and the dispute about primacy) and received the impetus for writing saints' *Lives* from there. Contemporary with the Irish *Lives* is a corpus of saints' *Lives* from Francia, many of which have been conveniently assembled by Fouracre and Gerberding.²³⁰ They were also heavily influenced by Sulpicius Severus's *Life of Martin*. It appears that these *Lives* provided a more immediate model for Cogitosus and Muirchú, and perhaps the other earlier writers whose work survives only anonymously and in later versions. The seventh-century *Lives* from Merovingian Francia changed the way of writing *Lives* of saints significantly enough for them to be seen as models for the Hiberno-Latin *Lives*.

2. The Origins of Biographical Writing in Antiquity

The choice of writing a saintly biography derives from the tradition of biographical writing as a whole in the Classical and medieval world. A saint's *Life* as a literary composition is a kind of biography in that it is a piece of writing that has as its focus the life of a person. The difficulty of defining biography as a literary "genre" in

Confessio, Sulpicius Severus, and Biographical Genre," delivered at the Irish Conference of Medievalists in 2014.

²³⁰ Fouracre and Gerberding, *Late Merovingian France*. The collection of *Lives* in the *MGH Rerum merovingiarum* is of course much more comprehensive in five volumes.

antiquity and the Middle Ages is notorious: Arnaldo Momigliano's statement "[a]n account of the life of a man from birth to death is what I call biography" is about as general as one can get (and even so denies half the population the opportunity to be a biographical subject).²³¹ Rather than talking of a biographical "genre," then, we can think of saints' *Lives* as "biographical" writings; that is, works that a reader recognizes as part of that tradition but still retaining the possibility of "(v)ariation, extension, and correction."²³² Biography is then not a genre so much as what Jauss calls a "horizon of expectation."²³³ Saints' *Lives* are recognizable as works written in the tradition of ancient biography and specifically of the philosophical *Lives* of the Late Empire. The generic background of Classical and Late Antique biographical writing provides a foundation for understanding what a writer or reader in the early medieval period would anticipate that a *Life* was for.

The history of ancient biography, especially after Suetonius and Plutarch, is part of the larger story of disputation in late Roman philosophy and religion.²³⁴ Even as early

²³¹ Momigliano. *The Development of Greek Biography* 11.

²³² Hans Jauss, *Towards an Aesthetic of Reception* translation from German by Timothy Bahti; introduction by Paul de Man (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982. 88).

²³³ Jauss *Reception* 88-89. See the discussion in Taylor, *Epic Lives* 26-27. The *Lives* can be understood as a dynamic literary form that underwent changes in the shift from antiquity to the early Middle Ages, and subsequently in the shift from the continent and Ireland; "...texts and literary traditions are themselves actively altered according to the various historical 'horizons' within which they are received," Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: an Introduction*² (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 72.

²³⁴ Leo, in *Die griechisch-römische Biographie* divides Classical biography into two types: the political and the literary. Philosophical biographies, since philosophers were writers, are a variety of the literary. The literary history of ancient biography from its beginnings to the early Middle Ages is more complex than we can deal with here.

as its origins in Classical Athens and Alexandria, biography was always at least potentially of use as a polemical weapon in philosophical disputes. In the context of the philosophical schools like the Academy of Plato, the Lyceum of Aristotle or the Stoa of Zeno, the character of the founder was of paramount importance. These philosophical schools were very much like the later Christian religious orders or sects, and became more like religions as time went on. The biography of the founder thus attained great significance in the context of competition between the sects, in intellectual terms as well as in terms of number of converts. Polemic among the sects spread to include negative biographies of the founders of other schools.²³⁵ In the world of late Roman antiquity, the competition between early Christianity and late paganism was especially intense. Both sides put much effort into establishing their own intellectual case, and undermining (or better, smearing) the opposition. According to the recent work of Richard Burrige, we should see even the Gospels in this light.²³⁶ In Burrige's view, the Gospels are forms of biography that serve a purpose similar to other late imperial *Lives*.

Biography, as Patricia Cox has shown, was especially useful in Late Antiquity for polemics in intellectual and spiritual disputes.²³⁷ Cox sees biography as approaching

²³⁵ As in Christian polemic, for instance, Lactantius' *De Mortibus Persecutorum*.

²³⁶ Richard Burrige, *What Are the Gospels?: A Comparison with Graeco-Roman Biography*², (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 2004), 204. See also his restatement of his thesis in Brian McGing and Judith Mossman, eds. *The Limits of Ancient Biography* (Swansea: Classical Press of Wales, 2006).

²³⁷ Cox, *Biography in Late Antiquity*. Her approach has been criticized recently by John Dillon in his "Holy and Not So Holy: On the Interpretation of Late Antique Biography," in McGing and Mossman, *Ancient Biography*, 155-67. Dillon cautions against accepting Cox's main point: "we should not be too quick to assume that we are dealing with the presentation of idealized archetypes, or the manipulation of empty rhetorical conventions" (164). While Dillon makes a valuable point, Cox's insight is still valid in

myth in Late Antiquity, since both pagans and Christians see God at work in the life of the holy man. Her two principal examples come from the two main traditions: the treatment of Origen the Christian by Eusebius in his *Historia Ecclesiastica*, and the *Life* of the Neoplatonist pagan philosopher Plotinus by Porphyry. In each life we see anecdotes that illustrate the holy man's religious power (or even, in other terms, *mana*); in later saints' *Lives*, we call them miracles or "virtutes," literally, "powers." The purpose of these anecdotes is explicitly to show the sanctity of the hero and how closely he is connected to divinity. The writers of saints' *Lives* do not choose the anecdotes they tell on the basis of their historical truth: the biographical writers perceive a deeper, religious truth, which is closer to being mythological.

The form as it developed in later antiquity was ideally suited to the use of writers of Christian *Lives*. Christian writers after Constantine adapted the biographical tradition of writing *Lives* as collective biographies. Both Plutarch's and Suetonius' *Lives* are written in groups, and, from the time of the Alexandrian scholars to Porphyry, lives of writers and philosophers appear in groups as well. In the Late Empire Christian writers wrote collective biographies, such as Jerome's *de Viris Illustribus* on the lives and works of Christian writers in explicit imitation of Suetonius' work of the same name which deals with earlier Roman writers. Christian writers such as Jerome were familiar with Suetonian biography: they were accustomed to portraying significant moments in the lives of pre-Constantinian saints in passion and martyrdoms. It is a small step from martyrdoms to full-fledged saints' *Lives*. Adapting the biographical form for Christian saints was natural. However, writing the biography of Christian saints as opposed to

the main. The character of the biographical hero is still *presented* as an idealized archetype notwithstanding the putative factual basis of the portrait.

writing *Lives* of philosophers and poets required more than simply changing the religious adherence of the main character.²³⁸ Timothy Barnes has recently traced the history of “hagiography” from its beginnings in the Gospels through early accounts of martyrdoms in the period before Constantine.²³⁹ Much of the historical content of the early martyrologies is authentic and historically useful. But with the toleration of Christianity and its eventual establishment as the Roman state religion, saints’ *Lives* became “a vehicle for deliberate fiction...and then a normal mode of literary composition.”²⁴⁰ The *Lives* of post-Constantinian Christian heroes, that is, bishops and monks, were certainly not as exciting as those of the martyrs, particularly since, as a rule, they did not have a death for the faith to prove their holiness. Hence the origin of fictionalized miracle stories

²³⁸ For the use of “hagiography” see Timothy Barnes, *Early Christian Hagiography and Roman History* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009) and M. Van Uytenghe, “L’hagiographie: un <<genre>> chrétien ou antique tardif?” *AB* 111 (1993): 135-88. Thomas J. Heffernan uses the term “sacred biography,” as in the title of his study of saints’ *Lives*: *Sacred Biography: Saints and Their Biographers in the Middle Ages*, and that may be the best term to use. I should make clear my own use of terminology. There were many ways of writing about saints in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages, all of which have loosely been described as “hagiography.” The texts are variously described in their MSS as *Vitae*, Miracles, Martyrdoms, *acta*, and so on. The *Lives* of Irish saints are all, with the exception of Tírechán’s *Collectanea*, written within the literary tradition of biography: *vita* or in Greek *bios*. I use the term “*Life*” as a general term for these writings. For a fuller discussion of the issues involved, see Lifshitz, Felice. “Beyond Positivism and Genre,” and Taylor, “Hagiography and Early Medieval History;” *ead.*, *Epic Lives* 21-28, discussing somewhat later verse *Lives*.

²³⁹ Barnes, *Early Christian Hagiography*.

²⁴⁰ Barnes *ibid.* xi.

or legends.²⁴¹ Such legends tended to develop in a manner conforming to set patterns of sanctity; to mythological archetypes in fact.²⁴²

By adding elements derived from biblical and martyrological sources, and of course miracle stories, saints' *Lives* altered the form of biography. Van Uytfanghe calls the new way of talking about holy men a "*discours hagiographique*," a broad term including all varieties of tales told about Christian and pagan spiritual leaders from the Empire; for instance, the *Life of Apollonius of Tyana* by Philostratus, which Van Uytfanghe described as "*cette Vita païenne où le discours hagiographique se deploye en abondance*."²⁴³ G.W. Bowersock in his Sather lectures describes at some length the literary landscape in which the "*discours hagiographique*" developed.²⁴⁴ Of course, Classical historiography always had some fictional elements, from invented orations to the reporting of legend and rumor as fact. It is not for nothing that Herodotus is called the "Father of Lies" as well as the "Father of History;" the epithets are not in the least contradictory. During the Empire, in both Latin and Greek, historical writing increasingly acquired more and more fictional elements, to the extent that even works such as Philostratus's, which precedes both Diogenes Laertius's series of philosophical *Lives* and the earliest Christian saints' *Lives*, seem to straddle the boundary between history and

²⁴¹ Barnes *ibid.* 154.

²⁴² Mircea Eliade's chapter "Archetypes and Repetition" in *Cosmos and History: The Myth of the Eternal Return*, trans. W. Trask (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1954) is very much worth reading in this connection. He talks about "the metamorphosis of a historical figure into a mythic hero ... historicity does not long resist the corrosive action of mythicization" (42).

²⁴³ Van Uytfanghe, "L'hagiographie," 162.

²⁴⁴ G. L. Bowersock, *Fiction as History: Nero to Julian*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

romance. Indeed, biographies generally considered to be a type of historical writing like Suetonius's *Lives of the Caesars*, share features with ancient novels. For instance, Suetonius' *Nero* describes the emperor kicking his pregnant wife Poppaea and ensuring her death; this act is paralleled in the nearly contemporary Greek novel, Chariton's *Callirhoe*, where the king Chaereas kicks his pregnant wife.²⁴⁵ Connections between the form of ancient biography and the ancient novel are close. Fiction was part of biographical writing from the earliest examples of the form.²⁴⁶ Recent work on the two forms has shown the similarity of narrative techniques between biography and fiction.²⁴⁷ In particular, Sulpicius Severus's *Life of Martin* employs novelistic strategies.²⁴⁸

Contemporary with many early saints' *Lives*, Procopius' mid-sixth-century *Vera Historia* is clearly a supernatural romance with historical elements. Christian saints' *Lives* are also part of this literary universe but in a Christian context. Christian literature, from

²⁴⁵ Suetonius *Nero* 35.3; Chariton, *Callirhoe* 1.4.12-1.5.1. The *topos* is not unique: see Susan Deacy and Fiona McHardy. "Uxoricide in pregnancy: Ancient Greek domestic violence in evolutionary perspective." *Evolutionary psychology* 11, no. 5 (2013): 147470491301100505.

²⁴⁶ Mary Lefkowitz showed that the *Lives* of Greek poets are nearly all fictional constructions: see her *Lives of the Greek Poets*, 2nd edition (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012).

²⁴⁷ See Koen De Temmerman and Kristoffel Demoen eds. *Writing Biography in Greece and Rome: Narrative Technique and Fictionalisation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016). In the introductory essay, "Ancient Biography and the Formalities of Fiction," De Temmerman comments on "the complexity and versatility of fictionalization in ancient biographical narrative."

²⁴⁸ Danny Praet, "The Divided Cloak as *redemptio militiae*," in De Temmerman and Demoen *Writing Biography*, 133-59. He notes "the generic conventions of ancient biography, especially spiritual biographies, and its liberties with regard to historical truth and 'useful' invention" (134).

the Gospels on, developed in tandem with the explosion of fictional literature characteristic of the Empire. Bowersock identifies novelistic elements in the Gospels, at the start of Christian literature, and the *Lives* of the saints possess such elements even more prominently.²⁴⁹ Saints' *Lives* are Christian novels and participate in the same "horizon of expectation."

The saints' *Lives* of the Late Empire were explicitly religious in intent, written to convert people to Christianity from paganism. The first Christian saint's *Life* with a wide influence was Athanasius's fourth-century *Life of Antony*, which Evagrius subsequently translated into Latin.²⁵⁰ This text shows the biographical subject as an ascetic and wonder worker in the desert; he displays Christian virtue in opposition to paganism and heresy. In this respect, the writers (Athanasius, and Evagrius as translator) were following imperial literary tradition. Here they were following late Roman literary practice in which biographical writing grew out of philosophical disputes. In Athanasius's *Life* the legends about Antony emphasize his status as a holy man in cosmic conflict with demons.²⁵¹ Athanasius demonstrates his sanctity in mythic, non-historical terms and has no need to conform to historical fact. Sulpicius Severus soon followed this *Life* with his *Life of St*

²⁴⁹ *Ibid.* 124. See also Sean Freyne, "Mark's Gospel and Ancient Biography," in McGing and Mossman, *Ancient Biography*, 63-76. Freyne connects *Mk.* with "a large cluster of ancient novels which would include such 'biographic' works as Xenophon's *Cyropaedia*, *The Alexander Romance* and Philostratus' *Life of Apollonius*" (69).

²⁵⁰ For a translation see White's Penguin Classics translation: Carolinne White, *Early Christian Lives*. (London: Penguin, 1998): 3-70.

²⁵¹ See Barnes, *Early Christian Hagiography*, 160 and Evagrius' cc. 33-37, part of a teaching discourse by the saint.

Martin of Tours in the fourth-century.²⁵² Sulpicius adapted the form as it had developed before his time, and retained the anecdotal technique along with the religious context; he also was writing under the influence of Christian martyrologies. The *Life of Saint Martin* is a highly literary work. While Sulpicius includes many of the typical elements of early saints' *Lives* (or Christian biography), he also pens a preface which he clearly modeled on the prefaces to Sallust's *Catiline* and *Jugurtha*. As with the preface to Tacitus' *Agricola*, this feature makes it clear that the author, Sulpicius, is situating his work in that tradition.²⁵³ In each case, the author establishes his literary and moral intentions in writing a short historical or semi-historical work.²⁵⁴ Sulpicius is explicit in situating his work in the Classical belle-lettristic tradition of essay writing, including biography. At the same time, the content of the life is precisely the non-historical legends of which Barnes speaks.²⁵⁵ St. Martin performs miracles, converses with angels and demons and performs miracles of healing. The *Life of St Martin* was the model for all subsequent Saints' *Lives* in the west, and it goes back to Classical models.

²⁵² See Stancliffe, *St. Martin and his Hagiographer* and the new edition and commentary, Philip Burton, *Sulpicius Severus' Vita Martini* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

²⁵³ Burton, in his new edition of Sulpicius's *Life of Martin* shows parallels to Sallust, Tacitus, and Livy. These were his literary models from the Latin tradition as Athanasius's *Life of Anthony* was in Greek: Burton, *Vita Martini* 31-32.

²⁵⁴ See Carolinne White's introduction to the translation of the *Life of Martin of Tours* in her *Early Christian Lives* 132, and Stancliffe, *Martin* 73-76. Barnes, *Early Christian Hagiography*, 213-15 sees the prefatory letter as an attempt by Sulpicius to link his work to Classical scientific and technical writings in order to claim a reliability equal to that of those genres.

²⁵⁵ Barnes, *Early Christian Hagiography*, 205-08 shows clearly that the historicity of the apparently most objective part of the *Life*, the account of Martin's military career, is questionable at best, undeniable fiction at worst.

Sulpicius's *Life of Martin* was well-known in Ireland. One of the earliest and best MSS containing this text is the *Book of Armagh*, the MS that is most closely associated with Patrick.²⁵⁶ This MS includes the texts of Patrick's own works, the *Life of Patrick* by Muirchú, the *Collectanea* of Tírechán, and, the only non-biblical and non-Patrician literature, Sulpicius Severus' *Life of Saint Martin*. It is a curious addition. Ludwig Bieler suggested many years ago that this *Life* was one of the texts that Patrick brought with him when he came to Ireland on his mission.²⁵⁷ It was associated with him and therefore was included in this MS.

3. Early Medieval Saints' *Lives* and the Rewriting of History

After the end of the western empire and the rise of the new Frankish kingdoms, the function of saints' *Lives* changed along with the social, political, literary, and religious context. *Lives* still presented a model of Christian life to the readers or hearers, but whereas earlier *Lives* primarily addressed doctrinal disputes between Christians and pagans and within Christianity, the early medieval examples are politically involved.²⁵⁸ The *Lives* reflect the new situation. Christianity was now the undisputed official religion throughout the territories formerly ruled by Rome. Martyrdom was no longer the common route to sanctity and the disputes in which the community was engaged were

²⁵⁶ See J. Gwynn, *Liber Ardmachanus: The Book of Armagh* (Dublin: Hodges Figgis, 1913), the facsimile edition, and Kenney, #131, 337-39. Bieler edited the Patrician documents in *Patrician Texts*.

²⁵⁷ Bieler, "Saint Patrick in Latin Language and Literature," 70.

²⁵⁸ It is of course the case that Eusebius wrote his *Life of Constantine* about the first Christian emperor, certainly a political figure; but rather than a "saint's" life, that work is an imperial biography.

internal. Instead of promoting Christianity rather than paganism, the saintly heroes of early medieval *Lives*, situated as they are in the mundane world of politics, support contemporary political realities in Francia, or the territorial or other claims of one monastery or episcopal see against another in accordance with the needs of the communities that were the literary patrons of the authors. The monasteries and bishoprics associated with one or another kingdom and their patron saints became tied to their royal patrons as well.²⁵⁹ For instance, the *Life of Balthildis* illustrates a “critical merger of power and sanctity which was such an important factor in attracting support of those who mattered in the late Merovingian political structure.”²⁶⁰ The anonymous author explicitly compares Balthildis to other holy queens of Merovingian Francia: in c. 19 of her *Life*, he says that “we do not think her to be inferior in merits of those earlier [queens]; rather we know her to have outdone them in holy striving.”²⁶¹ Other early Frankish *Lives* are similar. Since the ecclesiastical foundations and the kings were closely tied together, the church hierarchy and the secular nobility were associated as well. The new way to sainthood led through service to the church as an institution, service that was primarily available to the noble class who provided leadership to the church as well as to the state. Fouracre and Gerberding put it succinctly in their comments on the *Life of Audoin*:

²⁵⁹ For an account of the different circumstances, Gregory of Tours *Hist* 5.14, cited by Bouchard, *Rewriting Saints and Ancestors*, 205-06.

²⁶⁰ Fouracre and Gerberding, *Late Merovingian France*, 118. Bouchard, *op. cit.*, 201, on Balthildis’s monastic foundations.

²⁶¹ Fouracre and Gerberding, *op. cit.*, 132. “ea non putamus inferiorem meritis fuisse illis prioribus, sed potius multo magis eas in sanctis studiis precessisse cognovimus.” The Latin text: *MGH ss. Rer. Merov.* II 476-508 at 507

“Audoin was not important because he was a bishop; he was a bishop” (and thus became a saint) “because he was important.”²⁶² Sanctity was a function of political importance.

Frankish and other early medieval *Lives* had local political significance in a way that the *Lives* of philosophers and saints in Roman imperial times did not. The authors of these *Lives*, generally anonymous, wrote them to support a political side, and especially in many cases to support the authority of a monastic or episcopal foundation against other monasteries. The focus on monasteries and other ecclesiastical foundations reflects the developments in the fifth and sixth centuries, when the western empire fell. As Late Roman cities gave way to monasteries, the old classical civilization of urban centers all participating in the common classical culture with its cosmopolitan world view and its shared literary culture gave way to the particular, rural, and tribal culture of the northern non-Roman population whose ancestors may not have participated in the high culture of Late Antiquity in any significant way. The issues for religiously charismatic leaders who later became saints changed from the promotion of Christianity in a stable cosmopolitan and urban world sharing a common culture to the promotion of local Christian centers in a nominally Christian world of varied and ever-changing political structures, reflected in Christian establishments like rural monasteries that supported various kingdoms and kings.²⁶³

Saints’ *Lives* from the time of the Roman Empire integrate saints into a historicized way of viewing the biblical tale of Fall and Redemption, and see them in the world of eternity. Nonetheless, the mundane reality in which the saint appears to operate

²⁶² Fouracre and Gerberding, *op. cit.*, 148.

²⁶³ See Fouracre and Gerberding’s comments, *op. cit.*, 5-6. Now, see the summary comments of Bouchard, *Rewriting Saints and Ancestors*, 193-212.

is the stable world of the Roman Empire; that world is the accepted way things are. It is of course not the case that all the classical Romans of the period thought that their world was stable, politically or in other ways; nor is it the case that the Roman world did not suffer disruption. Nonetheless, cultural stability still remained: the barbarians may have been at the gates, but the gates still enclosed a world of the gymnasium and of rhetorical education. Most importantly, people expected that in the mundane world, Rome would continue to rule. Both in the world of eternity and in the temporal world of the Roman Empire, these saints possess universal significance. The saints of the Roman Empire do not validate the political arrangements of their time or stabilize the historical narrative of secular society in the way that the Merovingian saints did, as kings, queens, or members of the nobility. Instead they validate eternity. Medieval saints, on the other hand, represent eternity in a particular and local way. Peter Brown in his book on the cult of the saints does not directly address saints' biographies as a literary form, but much of what he says about saints' cults is applicable here.²⁶⁴ In the early Middle Ages as opposed to late antiquity the specific locality of the saint becomes more important as a locus of power. By contrast, the power of antique saints was in their universality.

In seventh-century Francia the rewriting of earlier Christianity was a significant part of the intellectual climate.²⁶⁵ The saints' *Lives* integrate their subjects' lives into the history of Christianity, to be sure, but also, and more significantly, into the history of the Merovingian kingdoms. It is especially true of the literature of the sixth and seventh

²⁶⁴ Peter Brown, *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981).

²⁶⁵ Bouchard, *Rewriting Saints and Ancestors*, 193.

centuries. As in contemporary Ireland, continental authors were writing annalistic chronicles as a way of managing the memory of their own past in order to provide a justification for present realities.²⁶⁶

The practice appears in Ireland as well. The Frankish sources, and by implication the Irish sources, including saints' *Lives*, are emphatically not attempts to produce a real description of the past (that is, of the actual circumstances of the foundation of specific monasteries, for instance), but are a tool of contemporary utility at the time of writing. That is, saints' *Lives* written in Francia and Ireland of the seventh century are deliberate creations of a "usable past" within the context of a saint of local power. The change in the purpose of the saint's life in the Christian societies of the post-Roman West changed the way saints' *Lives* operated in society. The writers were attempting to create the past from which their contemporary understanding and, ultimately, all subsequent understandings of Ireland or Francia would derive.

For instance, Irish writers wrote such persons as Palladius and other early Irish Christian leaders and missionaries out of history. In the works of Muirchú and Tírechán pre-Patrician attempts at Christianization are elided. There are some stories in the works of their contemporaries or near-contemporaries in the anonymous *Lives* that are in the "O'Donoghue Group" that deal with Palladius and the pre-Patrician saints of Munster. These stories (for which see below) seem to challenge the narrative that Muirchú and

²⁶⁶Rosamond McKitterick, *Perceptions of the Past in the Early Middle Ages* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2006). Bouchard dealt with the use of memory in France in the early Middle Ages: Bouchard, *op.cit.* Bouchard is contributing to the continuing scholarly discussion of memory and historical memory in the Middle Ages, a discussion she helpfully summarizes in her Introduction, 1-8. Also, Mary Garrison, "The Franks as the New Israel? Education for an identity from Pippin to Charlemagne," in Hen and Innes, *The Uses of the Past in the Early Middle Ages*, 114-61.

Tírechán established, but their successors in later centuries followed the standard story. Challenges to the narrative of the Armagh writers would have called into question the account that told of the unchanging dominance of Armagh and so, while they left traces in some of the sources, they were largely forgotten or trivialized.

4. The Irish Literary World and its Continental Connections

The Irish churchmen of the seventh century who authored the saints' *Lives* were in close contact with the continent. They were able to find a way to establish an agreed-upon past for Ireland based on the model of the *Lives* of Frankish saints. The works of the Irish writers were part of Christian literature and Irish writing in the seventh century was part of the literary world of Christian Latin. Ireland was scarcely isolated from the rest of the post-Roman west and had particularly close ties to Merovingian Francia. Kim McCone has argued forcefully that early Irish saints' *Lives* were primarily dependent on continental models, with due acknowledgement of the native folkloric element, particularly in the later *Lives*.²⁶⁷ The "assimilationist" approach which contrasts with the "nativist" approach recognizes the place of Hiberno-Latin in the literary world of the Latin west. Building on McCone's work, Elva Johnston describes the desire of the Irish Latin writers to seem part of the larger Christian world.²⁶⁸ Ireland's importance in the early medieval period came from the high level of education and scholarship available in its monasteries. Many students from England in particular, both lay and clerical, travelled

²⁶⁷ McCone, *Pagan Past*, 178-202; see 180-81 for discussion of "assimilationist" and "nativist" views.

²⁶⁸ Elva Johnston, *Literacy and Identity*, Ch. 2.

to Ireland to be educated at the Irish monastic schools, as Bede and Aldhelm note.²⁶⁹

Other travelers, both from and to the continent, had other purposes. Cumman in his *De*

Controversia Paschali talks about travelling to Rome in pursuit of information on

ecclesiastical discipline, to determine the way that the Romans were keeping Easter.²⁷⁰

Adomnán's *de Locis Sanctis* is purportedly the report of discussions he had had with

Bishop Arculf, a visitor to Iona from Gaul; it is not just a travelogue but has theological

purpose.²⁷¹ The seventh century also saw the beginning of Irish missionary activity on the

continent, starting with Columbanus' mission starting in 585 to the Frankish court,

Luxeueil, and eventually Bobbio.

The connections between Ireland and Merovingian Francia were thus close in the

seventh century. Irish writers not only adopted the literary form of the saint's *Life* from

Frankish models, but they also took from the continental sources the notion of using

saints' *Lives* to create a usable past. The relationship was not merely literary or, more

²⁶⁹Bede *HE* 4.26 for the case of Aldfrith of Northumbria. Called by Bede "vir in scripturis doctissimus," he is also known in Old Irish literature as Flann Fina, and is one of the Classical Old Irish writers. See now Colin A. Ireland, "Where Was King Aldfrith of Northumbria Educated? An Exploration of Seventh-Century Insular Learning," *Traditio* 70 (2015), 29-73; *id.*, ed. *Old Irish Wisdom Attributed to Aldfrith of Northumbria: an Edition of Bríathra Flainn Fhína maic Ossu*. (Tempe, AZ: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies (ACMRS), 1999); G. T. Dempsey, "Claviger aetherius': Aldhelm of Malmesbury between Ireland and Rome," *The Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland* 131 (2001), 5-18.

²⁷⁰ Cumman, lines 275-88, Walsh and Ó Cróinín, 92-94.

²⁷¹Dennis Meehan, ed. *Adamnan's De locis sanctis*. (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1983); Maria Guagnano (ed.), *Adomnán di Iona, I luoghi santi* (Bari: Edipuglia, 2008), with my review in *BMCR*: <http://bmcr.brynmawr.edu/2010/2010-10-30.html>. For the theological aspects, Thomas O'Loughlin, *Adomnán and the Holy Places: the Perceptions of an Insular Monk on the Locations of the Biblical Drama* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2007).

generally, intellectual. There was a political and diplomatic side as well. The intellectual and political contacts were not separate: Irish schools were involved at least tangentially with Merovingian kings.²⁷²

Picard illustrates one significant moment in Franco-Hibernian relations in the seventh century: the exile of Dagobert, the infant son of King Sigisbert III of Austrasia. Dagobert was sent to Ireland in the 650s-670s in order to make room for another claimant to the throne. According to Picard, the Irish monastic foundation at Peronne arranged the exile. The abbot was at that time Ultán, brother of Fursa and Foillan, and previously abbot of Louth.²⁷³ The most likely site for the exile was the abbey at Slane. The churches involved in the arrangements for the exile were also arguably involved in the development of the Hiberno-Latin biographical tradition.

Given the dating of both the exile of Dagobert and the composition of the earliest of the saints' *Lives* (i.e., Ultán of Ardbreccan's *Life of Brigit*, no longer extant: note that this Ultán is not the same man as the Abbot of Peronne whom I mentioned above) to the 650s, it is possible to associate the two events. The close ecclesiastical connections between Ireland and Francia apparent in the arrangements for the exile may imply also a literary connection. To quote Picard's conclusion: "...the association of Irish monks and Frankish aristocracy went beyond spiritual matters. In this respect the situation on the

²⁷² For Hiberno-Frankish contacts, see Kenney, pp. 183-209; and especially Jean-Michel Picard (ed.) *Ireland and Northern France, AD 600-850* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1991) and Picard's own contribution to that volume: "Church and Politics in the seventh century: the Irish exile of King Dagobert II," 27-52.

²⁷³ Picard, "Church and Politics," 44: "The connection between Peronne and Louth already existed from the time of Fursa and Ultán..."

continent in Francia was not very different from that in Ireland.”²⁷⁴ The use of the saint’s *Life* in each country acquired a directly political purpose; just as in Francia the *Lives* in, for instance, the Fouracre and Gerberding collection were directly connected to political uses, so in Ireland the *Lives* of the saints in the seventh century “...were based on an exchange of favours. In exchange for financial and political patronage the Irish monasteries provided not only spiritual support but also the written documents lending authority to the claims of the high-kingship by the Uí Néill.”²⁷⁵ Among the documents the *Lives* loom large. Before this, Irish Christianity did not see the need for biographies of saints from their own land. Now, the notion of using saints’ *Lives* for political work found a comfortable seat in the intellectual world of seventh century Ireland.

The relationship affected Latin literary production both in Ireland and in Francia. In both countries the seventh century was the time when composition of saints’ *Lives* began on a large scale. It is of course true that such works as Sulpicius Severus’ *Life of Martin* (c. 397) and Constantius’ *Life of Germanus of Auxerre* (c. 480) were earlier products of Late Roman Gaul, and the collection of *Lives* by Gregory of Tours in the late sixth century, the *Vita Patrum*, is very large as well.²⁷⁶ Nonetheless, the production of saints’ *Lives* in Francia quickened in the new century. The number of new *Lives* is considerable and their connection to political events undeniable. The character and apparent purpose of the seventh-century *Lives* are significantly different from the earlier works.

²⁷⁴ Picard “Church and Politics” 52.

²⁷⁵ *ibid.*

²⁷⁶ For Gregory, see now the edition and translation by Giselle de Nie in the Dumbarton Oaks Medieval Library, *Gregory of Tours: Lives and Miracles*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press 2015). The *Vita Patrum* runs to 297 pages of text and translation.

The Paschal Controversy (see Chapter 2) divided the Irish church into two factions, the *Romani* who followed the Roman way of calculating Easter and the *Hiberni* who followed that of the Celtic churches. The two factions map easily onto the division of Ireland into north and south, and more significantly onto the division of the church into the *paruchia* of Patrick and Brigit, committed to Rome, and the community of Columba, following the Celtic practice. The *paruchia* of Patrick had much closer ties to the contemporary continent, especially to northern Francia, and thus was in a better position to know how saints' *Lives* were developing there, and to adapt such writing to the Irish context. The Irish appear to have been the first to compose original *Lives* of long dead saints and not to have composed *Lives* of saints of their own time. Their focus is entirely on the saints who founded the early monasteries during what one might call the early "heroic" age of Irish monasticism. On the continent during the seventh century we still find writings about contemporary saints. The seventh-century figures of Audoin, Balthild, and others, were all subjects of seventh-century biographies. The Irish *Lives* are different. The change of a biographical subject from a contemporary figure of acknowledged sanctity to a figure from long ago implies a different purpose for the *Life*. The Irish *Lives* look to the past and create history.

The Irish writers who were most closely connected to Francia either found in the *corpus* of Merovingian saints' *Lives* a model for their control of information about the past, or perhaps developed it alongside the Frankish writers. While the two *corpora* are essentially similar, it remains true that the Irish *Lives* are distinctively different from the continental ones in a specific way. The vast majority at least of pre-Merovingian and Merovingian *Lives*, that is, those written before or after the end of the western Empire,

were written either by authors who knew the biographical subjects in life or who wrote shortly after the subjects' deaths, dependent on eyewitness reports. Among these are the early *Lives* I mentioned above, Sulpicius Severus' *Life of Martin* and Constantius of Lyons' *Life of Germanus of Auxerre*.²⁷⁷ In the case of monastic founders the *Lives* were presumably written to boost the fortunes of the foundations by glorifying the charismatic founder, but the *Lives* of Frankish queens and bishops of non-monastic foundations follow the same pattern. In this respect the Irish are different in that Cogitosus, Muirchú, Tírechán, and Adomnán all lived a century (in Adomnán's case) or more (in the case of the other writers) after the biographical subjects' deaths. Cogitosus and his model Ultán wrote in the seventh century about the life of the fifth-century Saint Brigit; Muirchú and Tírechán wrote on Patrick, also from the fifth century. The *Lives* in the *Vitae Sanctorum Hiberniae* in their present form were collected and edited in the eleventh century.²⁷⁸ Their textual history thus precludes definite identification of their place and time of composition, and their individual character was subsumed into the character of the collection. From these *Lives* themselves, though, we can see evidence that they too were composed originally much later than the saints they commemorate. The anonymous *Lives* show no personal familiarity with their subjects and there is little individuality in their portrayal. While the descriptions of the origins of the saints do demonstrate fairly detailed

²⁷⁷ See Jaques Fontaine (ed.), *Vie de Saint Martin*. (Sources chrétiennes no 133-135: Paris: Cerf, 1969); René Borius, *Constance de Lyon: Vie de Saint Germain d'Auxerre*, (Sources Chrétiennes 112: Paris: Les Editions du Cerf, 1965).

²⁷⁸ And perhaps at an earlier stage at the end of the eighth century: see Sharpe, *Saints' Lives*.

knowledge of the families and tribal associations of the saints, the saints themselves are not individually characterized.²⁷⁹

It is of course true that many early continental saints received revised *Lives* long after their deaths. For example, there are many rewritings of Sulpicius' *Life of Martin* in later times. The revival of his cult under the new circumstances of a Gaul without Rome required a new understanding of the saint.²⁸⁰ There were plenty of *Lives* from Francia in the seventh century that continued to deal with earlier saints, but they were rewritings.²⁸¹

The creation of the past was an important theme in the intellectual life of seventh-century Ireland as questions of authority arose in the context of the divisive controversy over Easter (on which see above, c. 2). Much of seventh-century Hiberno-Latin literature explicitly deals with the management of time: this was the period during which the earliest *Annals* took shape.²⁸² The management of the past was an important part of

²⁷⁹Bouchard, *Rewriting Saints and Ancestors*, 176-92, discusses ancestry in Merovingian Francia, concluding "no one (except the Merovingian kings themselves) thought in terms of lineage before the end of the eighth century" (192). This is not true in early Ireland. Genealogy is important in the saints' *Lives*.

²⁸⁰ See Raymond Van Dam, *Leadership and Community in Late Antique Gaul* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 137; the miracles in the new versions "emphasized the isolation in which people had been left by the withdrawal of the Roman Empire ..." 167.

²⁸¹ A notable example from somewhat later in the ninth century is the verse *Life of Brigit* by Donatus of Fiesole: D.N. Kissane, "Uita Metrica Sanctae Brigidae: a critical edition with introduction, commentary and indexes," *PRIA 77C* (1977): 57-192.

²⁸² The *Annals* forming the *Chronicle of Ireland* have their origins in the sixth century: Charles-Edwards, *The Chronicle of Ireland*. In Ó Cróinín's view, followed in several recent discussions, the *Annals* in Ireland originated largely as notations in Easter tables, used for reckoning the date of Easter by various ecclesiastical establishments. If this is so, as seems likely, the Irish project of the management of the past is placed squarely in the context of the Paschal controversy. See Dáibhí Ó Cróinín, "Early Irish *Annals* from Easter Tables: a Case Restated," *Peritia* 2, 74-86.

seventh-century Irish intellectual life in general. The seventh-century Irish *Lives* function as part of a larger effort of literary production in both languages to establish a past. At the moment that the writers of saints' *Lives* were working, the writers of the *Annals* and *Genealogies* were also creating the framework for understanding the Irish past. The Irish intellectuals (as Ó Corráin calls them, the “mandarins”), a unified class consisting of both clerical and lay intellectuals, were creating and developing an understanding of the country's past in several literary forms and using material in both languages.²⁸³

Bhreathnach describes the elements of “*senchas*” or “lore” in a general sense as including place lore, *Genealogies* and so on, in addition to the *Annals*.²⁸⁴ Scholars were beginning to assemble all of this material by the seventh century at the latest.

The literary management of the past includes other material as well, including technical computistic tracts and polemical treatises from writers such as Columbanus (*Epp.*) and Cummian (*de Controversia Paschali*).²⁸⁵ In essence the whole controversy can be seen as a way to control and manage historical time (and indeed eternity). Moreover, the parties to the controversy worked it out in a decidedly literary way.

²⁸³ See Ó Corráin, “Legend as Critic” and T. M. Charles-Edwards, “The Context and Uses of Literacy in Early Christian Ireland,” in Pryce, How, ed. *Literacy in Medieval Celtic Societies*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 62-82 whose article (at p. 70) calls the term into question. Ó Corráin means a class of learned churchmen and secular scholars, writing in both languages of early Ireland, in both religious and secular genres.

²⁸⁴ Bhreathnach, *Ireland in the Medieval World*, 1-8.

²⁸⁵ There are many anonymous computistical tracts extant: *BCLL*, #317- 24; #336. For Cummian and Columbanus, see Walsh and Ó Cróinín; G. S. M. Walker, ed., *Sancti Columbani Opera* (Dublin Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1957).

In the seventh century Irish writers chose to write their own *Lives* of native Irish saints. Irish connections to northern Francia gave the impetus. From the continental exemplars the Irish saw that the form of the saint's *Life* could answer their propaganda needs: stories of the saints of the fifth century who had founded the ecclesiastical centers which were in conflict served to strengthen their claims in the seventh. The form of saintly biography was suited to the creation of a "Past." The history of the biographical form in antiquity and the early Middle Ages shows that biographies were more often weapons in intellectual and ideological disputes than not. For Muirchú in the seventh-century Irish context, the glorification of Patrick and the promotion of his foundation at Armagh was paramount; so, he presents Patrick as the sole evangelizer of the whole of Ireland.²⁸⁶ For Cogitosus, the power of Brigit and Kildare was paramount, and so he presents her as having the authority of a bishop.²⁸⁷ In each case, the form of biography provided a way for the authors to elevate their saintly subjects and their foundations. Biography allowed Muirchú and Cogitosus to present Patrick's missionary activity and Brigit's (quasi-)episcopal position as parts of their characters.

²⁸⁶ For Patrick as, in fact, the follower of Palladius, see the next chapter.

²⁸⁷ Above, Chapter 2.

CHAPTER 5

CREATING A PAST: PALLADIUS, THE “PAST,” AND HISTORICAL DOSSIERS

1. Palladius is written out of history

Muirchú's *Life of Patrick* presented the justification for the position of Armagh as the primatial see of Ireland, a status derived from Patrick's status as the national apostle.²⁸⁸ In this *Life* Muirchú established beyond question Patrick's position as the first to bring Christianity to Ireland, as against other possible contenders, such as Palladius whom Pope Celestine dispatched “ad Scotos in Christum credentes,” or other earlier missionaries who operated in the south.²⁸⁹ There are scraps of evidence extant in scattered sources that indicate that Patrick was not the first Christian to come to Ireland, but instead followed these others. Muirchú and his community in Armagh could accept no such narrative and chronology. Armagh was asserting control over the entire ecclesiastical establishment of Ireland on the basis of its priority in time and on the authority deriving from its foundation by the supposed national apostle. The work of Muirchú and that of his contemporary Tírechán were meant to arrange the narrative of early Irish Christianity to guarantee the supremacy in ecclesiastical power of Patrick's foundation. Thus, Muirchú had to deny the existence of prior saints' *Lives* written about pre-Patrician saints, and to ignore Palladius. Muirchú's only reference to Palladius,

²⁸⁸ For a discussion of the issue of primacy, see above, chapter 2.

²⁸⁹ Prosper, *Chron. PL* 51:595; “to the Irish believing in Christ.”

recounting his failure, is a way of denying his significance. Palladius appears in the text only to die without having any effect on Irish history.²⁹⁰

Muirchú is conscious of the need to elevate Patrick and pass over the earlier figures. This awareness comes out in his preface, which is the earliest preface to a saint's *Life* from Ireland that engages significantly with a literary purpose or program. The mid-seventh-century writers who were the first to produce *Lives* in the generation before Muirchú (i.e., Ultán, Ailerán, and Laidcenn—see above, chapter 4, “Getting a Life,” for these authors) may have had programmatic prefaces, but their works either have perished completely or have lost their prefaces; the same is true of all of the *Lives* in the collections of *Uitae Sanctorum* extant from the eleventh century or the fourteenth century.

The earliest texts which we possess entire (i.e., with their prefaces intact), Cogitosus' *Life of Bridget* and Muirchú's *Life of Patrick*, allow us to see their authors at work.²⁹¹ Cogitosus, the earlier, says little about his impulse to compose save that he was, conventionally, compelled to write by his brethren (he was, he says, “a fratribus coactus beatae huius Brigidae uirtutes ... explicare,” “compelled by my brothers to describe the virtues of this blessed Bridget”). He acknowledges the fact that he had predecessors, claiming to be writing “pauca de pluribus a maioribus et peritissimis tradita” (“a few details handed down by elder and more learned men,” also a conventional *topos*). There

²⁹⁰ Bieler, *Patrician Texts* 72-73 (Muirchu I 8.3, and see below for the text).

²⁹¹ For the date, see Bieler, *Patrician Texts*, 1-2, dating the text to 661-700. Charles-Edwards is more confident, dating the work to the 690s specifying “c. 695,” (*ECI* 439-40). The citation of the text in *BCLL* (#303) says “c. 690.” See below for the dating of other *Lives*. Sharpe gives a short discussion of the early hagiography of Ireland in *Saints' Lives*, 12-14. Muirchú was one of the earliest.

is little here about his own writing: he writes the *Life* of a saint, derived from learned predecessors who are unnamed and who are not described explicitly as writers of saints' *Lives*. The implication is strong that they are, though, and Cogitosus is definite that they were plural. He is not explicit about his aims in writing.

Muirchú has more to say, but his words are problematic. Muirchú's purpose in writing seems clear from the words of his preface in which he addresses Bishop Aed of Sletty:²⁹²

(1) Considering, my Lord Áed, that many have attempted to write this story coherently according to the traditions of their fathers and of those who were ministers of the Word from the beginning, but that the great difficulties which the telling of the story presents, and the conflicting opinions and many doubts voiced by many a person have prevented them from ever arriving at one undisputed sequence of events: (2) I might well say that, like boys making their first appearance in the assembly (to quote a familiar saying of ours), I have taken my little talent—a boy's paddle-boat, as it were—out on this deep and perilous sea of sacred narrative, where waves boldly swell to towering heights among rocky reefs in unknown waters, (a sea) on which so far no boat has ventured except the one of my (spiritual) father Cogitosus. (3) However, far from giving the impression that I want to make something big out of something small, I shall (merely) attempt to set forth, bit by bit and step by step, these few of the numerous deeds of holy Patrick, with little knowledge (of traditional lore), on uncertain authority, from an unreliable memory, feebly and in poor style, but with the pious affection of holy love, in obedience to the command of your sanctity and authority.²⁹³

²⁹² On Aed, see above, chapter 2.

²⁹³ The Latin text from Bieler, 62: (1) Quoniam quidem, mi domine Aido, multi conati sunt ordinare narrationem utique istam secundum quod patres eorum et qui ministri ab initio fuerunt sermonis tradiderunt illis, sed propter difficillimum narrationis opus diuersasque opiniones et plurimorum plurimas suspiciones numquam ad unum certumque historiae tramitem peruenierunt: (2) ideo, ni fallor, iuxta hoc nostrorum prouerbum, ut deducuntur pueri in ambiteathrum in hoc periculossimum et profundum narrationis sanctae pylagus turgentibus proterue gurgitum aggeribus inter acutissimos carubdes per ignota aequora insitos a nullis adhuc lintribus excepto tantum uno patris mei Cogitosi expertum atque occupatum ingenioli mei puerilem remi cymbam deduxi. (3) Sed ne magnum de paruo uidear fingere, pauca haec de multis sancti Patricii gestis parua peritia, incertis auctoribus, memoria labili, attrito sensu, uili sermone, sed affectu pissimo caritatis sanctitatis tuae et auctoritatis imperio oboedens carptim grauatimque explicare aggrediar.

At first glance this passage seems to be saying two completely opposite things. According to Muirchú's words, Cogitosus was the first Irish writer of a saint's life and there was no other since (insitos a nullis adhuc lintribus excepto tantum uno patris mei Coguitosi). At the same time, many other writers have tried to write an account of Patrick (multi conati sunt ordinare narrationem). This contradiction is puzzling, and requires discussion.

It seems unlikely that Muirchú would have missed the earlier writings by Ultán, Ailerán, and Laidcenn. In the cosmopolitan intellectual and ecclesiastical milieu of seventh-century Ireland the intellectual class included people who surely knew one another, or had common associates.²⁹⁴ The monks from throughout the country certainly knew and visited one other, shared texts, and had studied together, or had met at church conventions such as the meeting at Drum Cett in 575.²⁹⁵ Ignorance of any earlier seventh-century literary production on Muirchú's part seems virtually impossible.

It is more plausible that Muirchú is describing his literary antecedents specifically to include only writers on Patrick, but there are difficulties with this idea. In the first place, Cogitosus wrote on Bridget not Patrick and, in the second, there still remain the previous efforts he disparages by, presumably, Ultán, Ailerán, and possibly Columba. As Howlett puts it, "One wonders then what Muirchú can have meant by writing ... *excepto*

²⁹⁴ On the intellectual climate of seventh-century Ireland, see Ó Cróinín, "Hiberno-Latin Literature to 1169," *NHI* 371-404; Bitel, *Isle of the Saints*; Bhreathnach, *Ireland in the Medieval World*.

²⁹⁵ *AU s.a.* 575: "Magna conuentio Droma Ceta in quo erant Colum Cille ocus (=et) Aedh mc. Ainmerech."

tantum uno patris mei Cogitosi” in reference to his predecessors writing about Patrick.²⁹⁶ Muirchú, then, seems not to be referring to earlier writers on Patrick, but rather is talking about earlier literary constructions of a narrative of early Irish history. In such a case, Cogitosus can be a predecessor, while he can pass by earlier writers on Patrick who are not concerned with Irish history.²⁹⁷ What Muirchú seems to care about most is correcting what he perceives as errors in previous understandings of Patrick in written works (although his words can refer to oral tradition as well).

A naïvely literal reading of Muirchú’s preface would suggest that his acknowledged intent in the *Uita* is to construct a narrative on his own terms out of a mass of material that he does not know well (*parua peritia*) and that he derived from unreliable sources (*incertis auctoribus*); lore that may or may not retain accurate historical memory (*memoria labili*). So naïve a reading cannot stand. It is clear that Muirchú is consciously constructing the historical figure of Saint Patrick from just those sources as much as from Patrick’s own writings. He creates “St. Patrick” as much by eliding parts of Patrick’s story that contradict his own narrative as by devising a new ordering of the material.

In Muirchú’s account, previous writing about Patrick falls short in several ways. The accounts that others have written are contradictory in chronology (if we, with Bieler, accept the word “*tramitem*” to imply a sequence²⁹⁸), narrative structure (“*narrationis*”

²⁹⁶ Howlett, “*Vita I Sanctae Brigidae*,” 23: “except only the one of my father Cogitosus.”

²⁹⁷ We may imagine such writers to be influenced by the early hymn in honor of Patrick, “*Audite Omnes Amantes*.” (*BCLL* #573; see also now John Carey, *King of Mysteries: Early Irish Religious Writings*. (Dublin: Four Courts Press Ltd, 1998), 147-61. The hymn recounts Patrick’s virtues but provides no narrative. It was well known during the period.

²⁹⁸ Bieler, *Patrician Texts*, 63, translates “*historiae tramitem*” as “one undisputed sequence of events.”

opus”), and approach to the material (“diuersas...opiniones et...plurimas suspiciones”). Certainly “tramitem” and “narrationis opus” imply a narrative sequence with a certain order, arguably chronological. Sechnall’s Hymn “*Audite Omnes Amantes*” has nothing of the sort, being ordered quite differently.²⁹⁹ By Muirchú’s showing previous writings on Patrick were less concerned with telling a story. His next phrase, “diuersas...opiniones,” implies something else: that previous work on Patrick had no certain framework for understanding the saint’s significance. Muirchú’s aim is to correct the diverse opinions and to establish once and for all, the correct narrative of Patrick’s life and career and the correct understanding of his importance as founder of Armagh.

One important element of Muirchú’s effort to establish the see of Armagh as the seat of the primate of Ireland is his portrayal of Patrick as the founder of the Christian church in Ireland. Patrick came, according to the narrative, to a pagan land, lit the Paschal fire and converted the pagan king Loíguire, went around the country founding churches, and left Ireland Christian at his death. There was a problem with telling the tale in this way: Patrick was not in fact the first Christian ecclesiastic to have worked in Ireland. There are slight traces of pre-Patrician Christianity in several sources, even including Muirchú. In particular, we know of Palladius, the earlier missionary, and some pre-Patrician saints (Declán, Albán, Ciarán, and Ailbe—see below) operating in the south of the country. However, Muirchú has shaped the accepted narrative of Patrick as the

²⁹⁹ The hymn is alphabetical, consisting of 23 stanzas which each begin with a word starting with sequential letters of the alphabet. It might just be possible to see traces of a chronological sequence in that in the fifth stanza, “*Electa Christi tallenta uendit euangelica,/quae Euernas inter gentes cum usuris exigit,*” his call to evangelization of the Irish comes near the start of the hymn, and in the twenty-second, “*Ymnos cum Apocalipsi, psalmosque cantat Dei,*” the Apocalypse is mentioned, the final book of the Bible and the account of the end of all things; but in neither case is chronology involved really.

Apostle of the Irish by rigidly excluding or minimizing evidence of his predecessor. All trace of pre-Patrician Christianity is elided, with the exception of the mere name of Palladius, whose work Muirchú describes as totally unsuccessful, leading to his death and Patrick's subsequent ordination as bishop and mission to Ireland.³⁰⁰

Palladius is known from Prosper's *Chronicle* (s.a. 423) as the first bishop to be sent "ad Scotos in Christum credentes."³⁰¹ That flat statement in a single source is all the direct evidence we have for his mission, and as such has been much discussed. Recent scholarship on early Irish Christianity has shown us some more details. Kathleen Hughes summarizes several strands of research in her contribution to the *New History of Ireland*.³⁰² Palladius was sent as bishop to an already-existing Irish Christian community which was already significant enough to contribute Latin loan words to the Proto-Old-

³⁰⁰ Muirchú 1.8. (7), Bieler, 72, says that Palladius "... missus fuerat ad hanc insolam sub brumali rigore possitam conuertendam. (3) Sed prohibuit illum quia nemo potest accipere quicquam de terra nissi datum ei fuerit de caelo. Nam neque hii fieri et inmites homines facile recipiunt doctrinam eius neque et ipse longum uoluit transegere tempus in terra non sua, sed reuersus ad eum qui missit illum. Reuertente uero eo hinc et primo mari transito coeptoque terrarum itinere in Britonum finibus uita functus." "(Palladius) ... had been consecrated and sent to this island in the cold north in order to convert it.(3) But he was prevented from doing so (by the fact that) nobody can receive anything from the earth unless it be given him from heaven. Neither were these wild and harsh men inclined to accept his teaching nor did he himself wish to spend a long time in a foreign country, but (decided to) return to him who had sent him. On his way back from here, having crossed the first sea and begun his journey by land, he ended his life in the territory of the Britons."

Note that divine approbation is denied to Palladius: his mission did not succeed because success was not "datum ei... de caelo."

³⁰¹ "ad Scotos in Christum credentes ordinatur a papa Caelestino Palladius, et primus episcopus mittitur." "Palladius was ordained by Pope Celestinus for the Irish who believed in Christ, and was sent (to them) as the first bishop" (Prosper *Chron. PL* 51:595).

³⁰² Kathleen Hughes, "The Church in Irish Society, 400-800," *NHI*, 301-330, at 302-03.

Irish language.³⁰³ He was not sent as a missionary to a land completely outside of Christendom. Dáibhí Ó Cróinín began an exploration of Palladius with a study of an Easter table ascribed to Patrick.³⁰⁴ In a long and much closely argued article, he suggests a fuller context for Palladius, identifying him with a correspondent of Rutilius Namatianus, and more specifically, as the “Sicilian Briton” of Caspari’s Pelagian corpus.³⁰⁵ Palladius on this reading transforms from a mere name into a real historical figure with a context in Late Roman Gaul and becomes a participant in the Pelagian controversy and a player in the events surrounding Germanus’ mission to Britain.³⁰⁶ Palladius’ Irish mission has left other evidence scattered in different sources. Taken together they suggest a mission to the south, perhaps centered at Cashel, a royal site associated with the Eoganacht kings but arguably Christian from its inception.³⁰⁷ Palladius is also associated with the midlands site of Clonard, later the site of one of the leading monasteries of the early Irish church.³⁰⁸ He is also supposed to have left books,

³⁰³ See Jane Stevenson, “The Beginnings of Literacy in Ireland.”

³⁰⁴ Dáibhí Ó Cróinín, “New Light on Palladius,” *Peritia* 5 (1986) 276-83. Ó Cróinín no longer holds with the ascription to Palladius (personal communication).

³⁰⁵ Dáibhí Ó Cróinín, “Who was Palladius ‘First Bishop of the Irish?’” *Peritia* 14 ((2000) 205-37. For the “Sicilian Briton,” see John Morris, “Pelagian Literature,” *JTS* 16 (1965) 26-60; *id.*, *The Age of Arthur* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1973), 338-43.

³⁰⁶ This is far too vast a subject to deal with here in detail. The main source is Constantius of Lyons’ *Life of Germanus*. The edition in the *Sources chrétiennes* series by Borius (*Constance de Lyon: Vie de saint Germain d'Auxerre*) has much information, but should be used with caution when dealing with early Irish history.

³⁰⁷ Hughes, *NHI* 303.

³⁰⁸ Ó Cróinín, “Who Was Palladius.”

writing tablets, and apostolic relics at Kileencormac near Castledermot, another important monastery in Co. Carlow.³⁰⁹

Despite these individual pieces of evidence, though, there is very little for historical scholarship to say about Palladius. Ó Cróinín summarizes the evidence that survives, consisting of the reference in Prosper; some slight archaeological evidence that may be associated with pre-Patrician Christianity in areas associated with Palladius; and linguistic evidence of Latin loan words that seems to be pre-Patrician.³¹⁰ Otherwise, Muirchú's narrative of Patrick as the unique apostle to the Irish succeeded in eclipsing the mission of Palladius. The *Annals of Ulster* s.a. 431 and 432 tell the story: Palladius is sent to convert the Irish and is never mentioned again.³¹¹ The subsequent story is all Patrick all the time.

There is more. Palladius was not the only Christian in Ireland before Patrick, and also not the only pre-Patrician missionary whose work Muirchú ignores. There is evidence for other saints operating especially in the south, known as the *quattuor sanctissimi episcopi*, namely, Declán, Abbán, Ciarán and Ailbe.³¹² These four saints may be “well-known” (in Ó Riain-Raedel's words) to modern scholarship, but they do not

³⁰⁹ Ó Cróinín, *EMI*², 75.

³¹⁰ Ó Cróinín, *EMI*², 41-45.

³¹¹ *AU*, s.a. 431.

³¹² See Sharpe, *Saints' Lives*, 115-17, discussing these four saints in the Dublin Collection. Sharpe himself cites Kenney, pp. 309-19. Kenney concludes “... before the great development of the Patrick Legend there were local legends in various parts of southern Ireland telling of the Christianizing of those districts by saints who knew not Patrick,” 311. Note, though, Sharpe's article “Quattuor Sanctissimi Episcopi: Irish Saints Before Saint Patrick,” in Donnchadh Ó Corráin, Liam Breatnach, and Kim McCone (eds.) *Sages, Saints, and Storytellers: Celtic Studies in Honour of Professor James Carney* (Maynooth: An Sagart, 1989), 376-99.

appear prominently in the extant early sources.³¹³ The province of Munster in the south of Ireland had close connections to the already-Christianized areas of Britain and Gaul. Sharpe and Ó Ríain-Raedel suggest that the *Lives* of the four holy saints from Munster were written in response to Muirchú's *Life* and to the claims of Armagh in the north to primacy over the whole of Ireland, rather than the other way around, since the information about them is found only in saints' *Lives* written after Muirchú and Tírechán.³¹⁴ Their appearance in the narrative of Christianization would cut into Patrick's successors' claim to supremacy over the entire island. They were not successful in seriously challenging the dominant narrative which appears in Muirchú's *Life of Patrick*.

Muirchú is therefore writing against a possible alternative narrative of early Christianity in Ireland. Such a narrative would go something like this: there were several early missionaries to Ireland from the continent or Britain; for the most part they came to the southern part of the country, i.e. the province of Munster with its center in Cashel, the seat of the Eoganacht kings. The localities associated with the "four most holy bishops" support this: St. Ailbe is the patron of Emly near Tipperary town, St. Declán, the patron of Ardmore, near Youghal in County Cork, St. Ciarán, of Saigir, near Birr in Co. Offaly, and St. Ibar of Beggary Island in Wexford. All these are southern localities. Latin loan words appear in Old Irish apparently before the mission of Patrick, notably the name of the royal center of Cashel in the south; this is derived from Latin *castellum* and is the

³¹³Dagmar Ó Ríain-Raedel, "The Question of the 'Pre-Patrician' Saints of Munster," in *Early Medieval Munster* (Cork 1998) 17-22, at 17. She gives a bibliography of the issue in her footnote #1, 22.

³¹⁴ Ó Ríain-Raedel, *op. cit.* Also, Sharpe, *Saints' Lives*, 115-17.

site of early Christian worship and the site of the Eoganacht kings' inauguration.³¹⁵

Palladius was sent as bishop to the Irish believing in Christ in 430, since there were already people of that description in Ireland. Patrick was a missionary to the north, but even there, he may have come across an existing Christian community. That Patrick's mission was important is not in doubt; however, he was not the first or only Christian missionary.

Such a hypothetical counter narrative provides, in Muirchú's terms, one of the "diuersas opiniones" that prevent the construction of "unum certumque historiae tramitem;" Muirchú's narrative is meant to establish the story that presents Patrick as the sole founder of the Irish church and of Armagh as its head. Muirchú uses the saint's *Life* to construct a narrative framework, basing his writing on saints' *Lives* from the continent and on the work of his Irish hagiographical predecessors from Ultán onwards. Following those predecessors, though, he has cast his narrative farther into the past, for his purpose is not the same as that of the continental writers. Muirchú and the other seventh-century Hiberno-Latin authors write their past in order to effect their present.

³¹⁵ See Hughes, "The Church in Irish Society," *NHI*, 303 for linguistic evidence.

2. Creation of a Useable Past.

Early Irish saints' *Lives* were part of the project of seventh-century writers to form a body of writing serving to validate present political and ecclesiastical realities. The early (and indeed, later) Irish learned class created *Annals*, *Genealogies*, mythology, legal writings, geography and dynastic lore (all of which contain material in verse along with material in prose) in order to establish an agreed-upon narrative of early Irish history.³¹⁶ Bhreathnach gives a concise account of the way the early writers worked: as circumstances changed, so did history. *Genealogies* acquired new ancestors for families newly joined to one another in alliance, for instance, and the alliances in historical battles recorded in the *Annals* changed in new versions as alliances changed in the writers' present. Writers of a great variety of literary works in both languages of medieval Ireland from the seventh century onwards created Irish history as an intellectual construct, and the authors of the seventh-century Irish saints' *Lives* were participants in the project.

The project of constructing a past was scarcely unique to Ireland in the early medieval period. Indeed, it is nearly a commonplace of historiography that such is a function of history writing.³¹⁷ During the early medieval period, all of Western Europe was especially in need of a constructed past. The collapsing Roman Empire had ceded power to new kingdoms whose rulers had to assert their legitimacy. Religious institutions

³¹⁶ Bhreathnach, *Ireland in the Medieval World*, 1-8.

³¹⁷ See Hayden White's influential *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*. (Baltimore: JHU Press, 2014). White analyzes historical writing as narrative. Also see Benedict Anderson's equally well-known *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London and New York: Verso Books, 2006), on nationalist historiography. Writing history is always ideological to a great degree.

had a place in this historicization. In Merovingian Francia, monasticism was perceived historically, with a focus particularly on foundation stories of monasteries. The monastic communities “...shaped their religious practices by contemplating their past, retelling the story of their predecessors until an account of fairly radical religious and structural innovation became the story of what had always been done.”³¹⁸ The account of the monastic past including interactions with kings validated present realities. In England in the eighth century, and surely influenced by the precedent of Irish writing in the seventh, Bede produced the apogee of post-Roman historiography, the *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum*. In this work, Bede uses “hagiographic” material very freely; he narrates many of the historical events in terms reminiscent of contemporary saints’ *Lives*. Bede’s work clearly relates to contemporary insular writings about saints including the eighth-century *Lives* of Anglo-Saxon saints from Northumbria. Cubitt discusses several of these *Lives* in her article in *The Uses of the Past in the Early Middle Ages*.³¹⁹ She shows that Bede, in rewriting the Anonymous *Life of Cuthbert*, recreated the past of the northern church at Lindisfarne to conform to the eighth-century Romanist practice rather than presenting the saint as an ascetic of the Irish *Hibernensis* type. “The Cuthbert who was remembered by later generations of Anglo-Saxons was Bede’s and not the holy man portrayed by the anonymous author.”³²⁰ Bede does this by, first, selecting his material and then by arraying it as a narrative, “...the function of which is to create the illusion of

³¹⁸ Bouchard, *Rewriting Saints and Ancestors*, 193.

³¹⁹ Catherine Cubitt, “Memory and Narrative in the Cult of Early Anglo-Saxon Saints,” in Yitshak Hen and Matthew Innes, eds. *The Uses of the Past in the Early Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000): 29-66.

³²⁰ Cubitt, *op. cit.*, 47.

actuality and to endow fragmented and disconnected events with meaning. Bede's causality is rooted in his priorities not in the reality of Cuthbert's life."³²¹

The Irish *Lives* appeared slightly earlier in the seventh century, but should be read in the context of early insular literature as one of the literary strategies to create an Irish past. The literary movement to create an Irish past included writings in all forms of writing that refer to the past. Previous researchers have examined the "synthetic history" (see below) of early Medieval Ireland as it emerges in the form of *Annals*, *Genealogies* and Old Irish "pseudo-historical" literature. The approach seems always to be one of looking at the end use of the "usable past"—in the case of Muirchú and Tírechán in the *Book of Armagh*, the aggrandizement of Armagh, that is, instead of the narrative that has been elided; the end rather than the process.

Few Irish historians have taken account of the way that the writers of the *Lives* in fact began the management of the past in the seventh century, nearly a century earlier than the vernacular sources or the versions of the *Annals*. One important purpose of the literature of saints' *Lives* in early Ireland is to establish a received narrative and to suppress any alternative. The eighth century seems to have been an *Achsenzeit* for the synthesis of Irish history in *Annals* and in the composition of vernacular tales. The saints' *Lives* of the seventh century laid the groundwork for that.³²²

The study of early medieval Irish historical sources shows that the national story is a deliberate fabrication by writers across the board: annalists, genealogists, fabulists,

³²¹ *ibid.*

³²² Liam De Paor, "The Aggrandisement of Armagh," *Historical Studies VIII*, (1971), 95-110 at 106. The early *Annals* before the seventh century are a creation of Armagh propaganda. They were perhaps derived from paschal tables.

and the writers of saints' *Lives*. Scholarship has recognized this for years. Nearly a century ago Eóin Mac Néill, "the founding father of the scientific study of early Irish history,"³²³ coined the term "synthetic historians" to describe the medieval writers who assembled a seamless story of the Irish past. As he pointed out, the one constant condition of medieval Irish historiography is that all historical and so-called "pseudo-historical" writings that deal with pre-Patrician Ireland were constantly rewritten or re-edited to take account of changing circumstances.³²⁴ Mac Néill's work deals mainly with the Old Irish accounts of Irish prehistory—the legends of the series of "invasions" and their synchronism with biblical history and with one another; and with how a modern scholar of early Ireland should synchronize the historical tales and *Genealogies*, and the other material. Mac Néill finds a rather Victorian rationalistic explanation for the impulse to synthesize historical traditions: historical synthesis "appealed to the uncritical spirit of the time: just as even a weak and specious philosophy appeals to vacuous minds, gratifying them with a sense of some form of unity and order to take the place of chaos."³²⁵

Scholars of the early and mid-twentieth century following Mac Néill approached their material with historically positivist attitudes: they were interested in source criticism as a means of determining the historical accuracy of individual items in the historical writings in order to provide accurate and usable information for the reconstruction of true

³²³ Donnachadh Ó Corráin, "Introduction to the 1981 edition," in Eóin Mac Néill, *Celtic Ireland*, (Dublin: The Academy Press, 1981, originally 1921), iii.

³²⁴ Mac Néill, *Celtic Ireland*, Chapter III, "The Irish Synthetic Historians," 25-42. Mac Néill talks of their "elaborate artifices employed to fill up the vacuum of the Irish past," 33.

³²⁵ *ibid.* 41.

and objective ancient Irish history. As an example, the work of T. F. O’Rahilly adds little to the discussion of the creation of the past; he concentrates on the chronology of the composition of the *Genealogies* and king lists, but takes the *Annals* of the fifth century as, in the main, accurate historical records.³²⁶

Mac Néill’s positivist approach does nothing to advance the understanding of what the saints’ *Lives* are all about, though. Later twentieth-century research shows a way forward: instead of trying simply to recover nuggets of fact in the *Lives*, we should read them as literature with its own conventions. In Binchy’s revolutionary article, “Patrick and his Biographers, Ancient and Modern,” we see the *via negativa* of scholarship at its best: Binchy establishes that all medieval sources on Patrick (including our texts of Tírechán and Muirchú, of course) contain no genuine historical information beyond what readers might glean from a reading of Patrick’s own works.³²⁷ To put it another way, all of the sources that purport to be historical are fictional constructions of an imagined past, written for an audience contemporary with their writing (i.e., the seventh century) and dealing with concerns contemporary with their composition. Binchy discusses the sources for Patrick, including the synthetic historians. He examines the *Annals* and comes to the conclusion that they were written at a much later time than the time of which they speak: “...the *Annals* of the fifth and sixth centuries represent a deliberate re-writing of history

³²⁶ T. F. O’Rahilly, *Early Irish History and Mythology* (Dublin, The Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1946).

³²⁷ D.A. Binchy, “Patrick and his Biographers, Ancient and Modern,” *Studia Hibernica* 2 (1962), 7-173. A gem of skeptical scholarship. For an assessment of its importance, Thomas O’Loughlin, *Discovering Saint Patrick*, 4, fn #2, says “We can roughly divide modern writing about Patrick into two camps,” namely scholarship before and after Binchy’s article appeared. Binchy’s criticism of O’Rahilly appears on p. 71.

for the purpose of exalting the Uí Néill dynasties at the expense of their rivals.”³²⁸ Any genuine contemporary annalistic entries begin no earlier than the end of the sixth century. After the publication of Binchy’s article, research on early Irish history shifted from attempting to recover facts from unreliable sources to studying the sources themselves as “synthetic history,” a shift from positivism to a more subtle historiography.

Other important sources for the early history of Ireland such as the *Annals* and the *Genealogies* are similar to “synthetic history” in that they respond to the political needs of their time of composition and recomposition. Kelleher examines the *Genealogies* and *Annals* in several important articles. In “History and Pseudo-History,” a call to Early Irish historians to make better use of the *Annals*, he sees the *Annals in toto* as having been rewritten in or after the ninth century in order to establish the antiquity and supremacy of the kingship of Tara, then a possession of the Uí Néill, as the High Kingship of Ireland.³²⁹ His approach thus extends the idea of Irish historical writing as a form of managed information from prehistory into the historical period. Regarding the propaganda for the pre-eminence of Tara, he states,

A good deal of the process is reflected in the *Annals*, and we can infer still more of it by observing where and how the *Annals* have been rewritten, for I believe it can be shown that everything in the *Annals* up to about 590 and a large number of entries from thence to 735 (the entry on Bede's death) were either freshly composed or wholly revised not earlier than the latter half of the ninth century. Nor does the rewriting stop at 735... No doubt even a large portion of this information is genuine. It will, however, be a long while before we shall be able to say with confidence what is reliable and what has been tampered with or falsified.³³⁰

³²⁸ Binchy, “Patrick and his Biographers,” 75.

³²⁹ John V. Kelleher, “Early Irish History and Pseudo-History,” *Studia Hibernica*, No. 3 (1963), 113-127.

³³⁰ Kelleher, “Early Irish History” 122.

Kelleher notes that the Uí Néill claim to the kingship of Tara was weak: “In the early historical period that claim was as new as it was vast, to support it history had to be rewritten.”³³¹ Furthermore, he calls attention to the alternative narrative that remains below the surface of the annalistic story. He continued to examine the sources with an article on the *Genealogies*.³³² Indeed, as he points out, “... all Irish history and prehistory was ideally intended, and to a considerable degree actually composed, as one self-consistent body of information.”³³³ That is, all of the early sources, including the saints’ *Lives*, are equally part of the project of rewriting early Irish history. The *Genealogies*, though, are considerably more confused than the *Annals* and saints’ *Lives* and thus preserve more of the underlying discrepant narrative: “the compilers were forced to hedge, to blur, to leave lacunae, in order to conceal the underlying incoherence of their construction.”³³⁴ Kelleher’s work makes it abundantly clear (if there were any doubt) that all early Irish historical sources are deliberately written to enforce a particular narrative. Like other early Irish historians, though, Kelleher concentrates his attention on the *Annals* and *Genealogies*, leaving the saints’ *Lives* aside.

³³¹ Kelleher, “Early Irish History” 125.

³³² John V. Kelleher, “The Pre-Norman Irish *Genealogies*,” *Irish Historical Studies*, Vol. 16, No. 62 (Sep., 1968), 138-153.

³³³ Kelleher, “*Genealogies*,” 140.

³³⁴ *ibid.* 144.

Donnachadh Ó Corráin has discussed early historical writings in many articles over the course of a long career.³³⁵ His “Nationality and Kingship” clarifies the compositional context of the writers:

...the bulk of the early historical sources are literary and highly conventionalized products of specialist learned classes, retainers of the contemporary holders of power, who were at pains to legitimize all change by giving it the sanction of immemorial custom and who ruthlessly reshaped the past to justify the present.³³⁶

Ó Corráin makes the point that what he calls this “mandarin” class was supportive of kingship and so they developed the intellectual project of rewriting the history of Ireland during the seventh and eighth century.³³⁷ They did much to create the idea of high kingship and “elaborated the idea of the overkingship of all Ireland and projected it backwards into even the remote past,”³³⁸ These historians therefore created the past in support of the present. In his conclusion, Ó Corráin says this:

It would appear that the Irish had developed a sense of identity and ‘otherness’ as early as the seventh century and had begun to create an elaborate origin-legend embracing all the tribes and dynasties of the country. This was the work of a mandarin class of monastic and secular scholars whose privileged position in society allowed them to transcend all local and tribal boundaries.³³⁹

³³⁵ Donnachadh Ó Corráin, “Nationality and Kingship in pre-Norman Ireland,” *Historical Studies* XI (1978), 1–35.

³³⁶ Ó Corráin, “Nationality and Kingship,” 12.

³³⁷ Donnachadh Ó Corráin, “Legend as Critic,” *Historical Studies* XIV (1987), 23–38. For a description of the “mandarin” class, see David E. Thornton “Orality, Literacy and Genealogy in Early Medieval Ireland and Wales.” *Cambridge Studies in Medieval Literature* 33 (1998): 83–98 at 83: they were a “...literate, aristocratically minded and hereditary clergy, working for the most part in monasteries but concerned directly with (and often closely related to) their secular cousins.”

³³⁸ Ó Corráin “Nationality and Kingship,” 19.

³³⁹ Ó Corráin *ibid.* 35.

All the same, his comments, while very important, do not really acknowledge the part that the Latin saints' *Lives* played in the construction of the past: his focus remained primarily on the Irish language sources which are generally later. In a later article, he expands the discussion to include the *Genealogies* with similar results: in the *Genealogies*, "an origin is the demand the present makes on the past, not knowledge of the past for its own sake."³⁴⁰

The *Annals* and *Genealogies* have their origins in the early seventh century or even earlier but were organized in the eighth century and constantly revised afterwards. The saints' *Lives*, of the seventh century, though, were the first fully developed texts that present us with a coherent (albeit partial, in both senses) narrative of early Irish history.

3. Creating the Past, Trouillot and others

The seventh-century *Lives* are the first attempt to create a real "past" for then-modern Ireland, and especially the first attempt to suppress an alternative narrative. The *Lives* are the first to formulate a body of historical literary material from which a narrative of early Irish history could be derived by and for the secular and ecclesiastical leadership contemporary with its creation. This is particularly true of Tírechán and Muirchú whose works appear in the genuinely historical dossier, the *Book of Armagh*.³⁴¹

³⁴⁰ Donnachadh Ó Corráin, "Creating the Past: the Early Irish Genealogical Tradition," *Peritia* 12 (1998) 177-208, at 185.

³⁴¹ For all the texts in the *Book of Armagh*, BCLL # 354-60; Kenney #127-131, and pp. 319-39 in general. Facsimile and diplomatic edition: J. Gwynn, J. (ed.). *Liber Ardmachanus. The Book of Armagh* (Dublin: Hodges Figgis & Co., 1913). Bieler's

The church of Armagh clearly assembled the MS to contain a variety of materials supporting the claims of Patrick's see, prominently featuring the narrative of Muirchú and Tírechán's collection of stories relating to Patrick's activity.

This activity of dossier building is reminiscent of Trouillot's account of silencing the past in Haiti, the Alamo, and elsewhere.³⁴² His work on Haiti in particular is unexpectedly relevant to understanding the project of the Irish scholars of the early medieval period, who aimed to capture the Irish past in a standard historical narrative. In Trouillot's view, historians effectively silence alternative accounts when they establish an "archive" of material from which historians can construct a narrative and understand the past. Their "archive" of material includes what they want to include and, significantly, excludes what they want not to consider as suitable history. Trouillot's work examines the process of creating "history" through historians' activity in establishing an agreed-upon set of sources, or types of sources, that will be taken seriously in the creation of a narrative of events. This dossier of sources excludes alternative views. Trouillot instances American historians' elision of Mexican sources on the Siege of the Alamo that question the actions of Col. Travis, a hero of the battle in the dominant American narrative; in Haitian history, Trouillot's own specialty, the activity of the servile rebel general Sans

edition, *The Patrician Texts in the Book of Armagh*, includes not only the texts of Muirchú and Tírechán, but other Patrician material: the *Book of the Angel*, *Additamenta*, and *Notulae*. Bieler (3) suggests that this section may have been one of three separate books, the other two composed of the other two main sections of the manuscript: a complete New Testament and Sulpicius Severus's *Life of Martin*. The Patrician material is certainly designed to form a dossier on Patrick.

³⁴² Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995).

Souci has been passed over in the accepted narrative of the Haitian Revolution that privileges the action of the literate, educated general, Toussaint L'Ouverture.

Thus it is in seventh-century Irish historical writing. In early Irish history the controlling narrative regarding the Christian church remains firmly based on the sources written in Latin before the eleventh century and specifically on the saints' *Lives* in our seventh-century corpus. Certainly writers like Muirchú or the annalists present a narrative that is coherent, including elements of fact as well as fiction, but all contributing to a picture of the fifth century that was of use in the seventh. Equally, the overarching narrative of Patrician ecclesiastical domination over the church throughout the country and the implications of that for the political domination of the Uí Néill dynasty require that those historians have to deal with facts recorded in earlier sources that contradict the accepted narrative. This they do by minimizing them, denying them, or simply ignoring them.

In Trouillot's examples, historians exclude silenced "further voices" from historical memory. The successful silencing of any discordant voices in early Irish historical sources means that they have in fact disappeared almost entirely. We can reconstruct an alternative narrative only by tracing its negative image, as it were, in what the established narrative has emphasized without good reason (hence calling attention to an alternative explanation), in what it leaves out, or in what appear as small items of fact lying forgotten and disregarded among the *Annals* and other sources. As we have seen, in

Muirchú's *Life* the narrative essentially excludes Palladius. His presence in the *Life* at all is merely so that he can be dismissed and Patrick's missionary activity privileged.³⁴³

In the world of Christian and pagan conflict during the Late Empire, both sides generated a considerable body of literature supporting their interpretations of the past, the *locus classicus* of which is of course Augustine's *De Civitate Dei*. Similarly in seventh-century Ireland the conflicts between political and ecclesiastical powers gave rise to the writing of historical literature including *Annals*, *Genealogies*, various aspects of traditional *senchas* and, our own concern, saints' *Lives*. In addition, the project of historical creation in the seventh century helped generate the establishment of a corpus of historical material, a dossier of the sort that Trouillot describes: the accepted body of evidence to which future historians were to be limited in the writing of history.

We can see a parallel in Anglo-Saxon England, slightly later. Bede also creates a historical dossier regarding Cuthbert, like Muirchú using the *Life* of the saint as his medium. Bede's *Life of Cuthbert*, an extensive rewriting of the earlier anonymous *Life* recast Cuthbert as a conventionally holy bishop, conforming rather to the model of Romanist than to the Irish influenced ascetic of the earlier *Life*. It was Bede's version that became the official version that the church at Durham supported.³⁴⁴ As with the Irish

³⁴³ That historical writing is often used for ideological purposes, especially to validate or challenge the political or religious *status quo*, is well known. J.H Plumb in his *Death of the Past* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973) makes the point succinctly in a discussion specifically of early Assyria, but applicable in many other contexts, including ours: "The past was constantly involved in the present, and all that enshrined the past... were essential weapons in government, in securing the authority, not only of the king, but also of those whose power he symbolized and sanctified." (32) He makes the further point that the very moment of conflict among historical authorities generates great intellectual struggles by historical scholars.

³⁴⁴ Cubitt, "Memory and Narrative," 47.

examples from the seventh century, Bede is concerned with the Easter Controversy; he condemns the *Hibernenses* to excommunication (see above chapter 2). Cubitt contrasts Bede with his predecessors in his use of narrative.³⁴⁵ From the perspective of the Irish *Lives* though, it is not something entirely new, for Muirchú had been doing this a generation earlier.

Patrick Geary in *Phantoms of Remembrance* deals with many of the issues involved in the creation of historical memory, albeit in the different context of the eleventh century on the continent.³⁴⁶ He points out that the decisions of later scholars of the eleventh century, who selected material for their own purposes from records more contemporary with earlier times, condition even our present understanding of early medieval history. Similarly in Ireland, our knowledge of the seventh century and earlier depends on collections of saints' *Lives* and *Annals* collected, edited, and rewritten between the eleventh and fourteenth centuries.³⁴⁷ While we do have very early contemporary or near contemporary material from the seventh century, it remains true that the bulk of the material—the collections of saints' *Lives*, the *Annals*, the *Genealogies*—is found in much later manuscripts, the products of much editing for purposes contemporary with the recension rather than the composition. Our concern is

³⁴⁵ “Bede created a new sort of memory in his narrativizing of St Cuthbert,” *ibid.*, 50.

³⁴⁶ Geary, Patrick. *Phantoms of Remembrance: Memory and Oblivion at the End of the First Millennium* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).

³⁴⁷ Geary, *Phantoms of Remembrance* 14. See Kenney, pp. 1-26; Bhreathnach, *Ireland in the Medieval World*, Chapter 1; Donnachadh Ó Corráin, “What Happened [to] Ireland’s Medieval Manuscripts?” *Peritia* 22-23 (2011-12), 191-223, for the somewhat later ruthless destruction of early manuscripts for political and religious reasons.

with the creation of the usable past in the seventh century, itself a reconsideration and consolidation of traditions originating up to two centuries earlier.

Geary writes at some length (Chapter III) about “archival memory,” using “archive” in the more usual sense of “charters and diplomas” as opposed to Trouillot’s idea of a body of accepted and sanctioned writings.³⁴⁸ What he says is of importance though. The function of both sorts of “archive” is similar: to validate, and to record the validation of, power and possession in a way that future investigators will accept.

4. Reading the *Lives* as Literature

It is not entirely fair to say that saints’ *Lives* have never been read as part of the seventh-century construction of Irish history. For instance, Liam de Paor sees the saints’ *Lives* of the later seventh century, the works of Tírechán and Muirchú, as an attempt of the older, pre-monastic churches whose foundation dates to the missionary period of the fifth century, including especially Armagh, to establish their primacy over the newer monastic foundations.³⁴⁹ The earlier foundations had been established before the explosion of monastic foundations of the sixth century. More importantly, their founding saints established them in the royal sites of *tuatha* which were politically important in the fifth century but whose political significance diminished over time (as for instance is the

³⁴⁸ Geary, *Phantoms of Remembrance*, 81. See Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 26-27 for his definition of “archive.” In his account of the creation of history, it is one of the stages at which divergent views can be silenced: there are four “moments: the moment of fact creation (the making of *sources*); the moment of fact assembly (the making of *archives*); the moment of fact retrieval (the making of *narratives*) and the moment of retrospective significance (the making of *history* in the final significance).”

³⁴⁹ De Paor, “The Aggrandisement of Armagh.”

case for Armagh). The saints' *Lives* of Patrick and of Bridget reflect the alliance of the churches of Armagh and Kildare in their opposition to the newer churches: the sixth-century monastic churches have fewer connections to the continent and the churches of Gaul, and so the mid-sixth century plague that hit Ireland hard affected them less. The newer monasteries were also the ones supporting the Celtic dating of Easter. There is a distinct division between the two groupings; by the seventh century it had become important for the church of Armagh to re-establish its primacy, but necessarily through propagandistic means rather than political means.

Charles Doherty in "The Irish Hagiographer: Resources, Aims, Results,"³⁵⁰ continues the discussion of the political purposes of the early saints' *Lives* and shows ways in which they function in propagandistic terms, noting that "(t)he hagiography of the period [sc. the seventh century] is the propaganda of the survivors—their justification for having absorbed the property, and having acquired control over the rights and jurisdictions, of others; and of course it also reflects their pretensions and claims."³⁵¹ Many of the anonymous *Lives* we possess have undergone much revision at several points. Every re-editing changes the message of the life. Doherty specifically uses the anonymous *Lives* of Maedóc/Aidán, which are much later than the seventh century in their present form, to discuss the changes in political situation in the eleventh century, showing the continuing reworking of the historical material for contemporary

³⁵⁰ Charles Doherty, "The Irish Hagiographer: Resources, Aims, Results," *Historical Studies* XVI (1987), 10-22.

³⁵¹ Doherty "The Irish Hagiographer" 12.

purposes.³⁵² Doherty is concerned with the results of the propaganda: “(h)agiographical writing is seldom undertaken for its own sake: it normally makes an appearance at a point of change,” which is an apt comment on the origins of all the Irish saints’ *Lives*.

Ó Cróinín discusses at some length the early “pseudo-historical” sources in his chapter in *The New History of Ireland*.³⁵³ He rightly sees the work of the synthetic historians as one of the main issues in early Irish historiography. Ó Cróinín is at pains to show that the early synthetic work present in the *Annals* and *Genealogies* is in fact entirely a concoction of the writers. He claims that the synthesis can be shown to have begun in the eighth century (182) but acknowledges that “(t)here is no reason to believe that such practices were any less prevalent in earlier centuries...” He is adverting specifically to genealogical corruption, but his comments are applicable, *mutatis mutandis*, to other historical material. The creation of a usable history is certainly present in the seventh century Latin saints’ *Lives*, but Ó Cróinín dismisses their importance, saying that “they were never more than occasional pieces, composed to suit a certain set of circumstances.”³⁵⁴ This is precisely the case: we need to read the saints’ *Lives* carefully, since their status as pieces of a created usable past is why they were originally written. What scholars like Doherty, de Paor, and Ó Cróinín do not consider is the *way* in which the *Lives* construct the meaning of the past; that is, the literary techniques the writers employ to establish an authoritative account of the past. References to the kings of the fifth century and their interactions with Patrick and Brigid of course do look

³⁵² Doherty, *loc. cit.*

³⁵³ Dáibhí Ó Cróinín, “Ireland, 400-800,” *NHI* 182-234.

³⁵⁴ Dáibhí Ó Cróinín, “Hiberno-Latin Literature to 1169,” *NHI* 371-404, at 387.

forward to the position of dynasties of their descendants in the seventh; however, the ways in which the writers create credibility are important, and we should view the choice of literary form, the type of content in the *Lives*, and the details of the style in which they are written. These are the ways in which the writers present their story of the early history of Ireland: the way the propaganda works creates the meaning.

5. Conclusion

The management of information by which writers of the seventh century and later filtered the records of early Ireland has had an important effect. The “usable past” embodied in the seventh century *Lives* was useful precisely as a way of creating an understanding of Irish history. It has worked: the historical “archive” that they thus created has in fact conditioned early Irish historiography ever since. Palladius, for instance, remains a shadowy figure, even as modern historians try to place Patrick into a more realistic context in Late Antiquity.

The writers of the saints’ *Lives*, notably the Armagh writers (Muirchú and Tírechán) did indeed create a “dossier” of historical writings. The way in which these writings work to establish a narrative has not been adequately studied. Assertions by historians of the *Lives*’ power are not enough: we have to read them as literary texts and analyze them in order to understand how they make the “Past.” The choice of the biographical form was a beginning for the writers: they could use the polemical tradition of the form. In the following chapters I look at the content of the *Lives* (miracle stories) and the details of the style. These literary features form the heart of the power of these texts.

CHAPTER 6

SAINTS' *LIVES* AND MIRACLE STORIES

The Irish writers of the seventh-century *Lives* used miracle stories not only because they were a traditional component of Christian writing from as early as the Gospels, but also because the stories functioned in the Irish context to support the narrative that created the Irish past. They included the stories because the *Lives* created the Irish past for the seventh century: they showed how the kings of the fifth and sixth centuries established the dynasties of the seventh, and how the fifth- and sixth-century saints founded the ecclesiastical centers that were prominent in the seventh. The saints in the stories acquire their power directly from God; they bless kings and so confirm their future dynasties in power, because when the saints bless kings in the earlier century the dynasty descended from them is thus also divinely ordained to rule in later times. The saints founded monasteries or bishoprics and these foundations also acquire divine authority in the world contemporary with the writing of the *Lives*. Miracle stories are essential in the construction of the past because they indicate the source of the order in the writers' present.

In this chapter I argue that since miracles occur as the intrusion of the divine plane into mundane reality, the fact that they occur at all means that the stories telling of them are uniquely credible; that is, that the results of divine intervention in the mundane world are part of the divine order. Since the miracles often relate to kings and ecclesiastical power, the acts of the saints that relate to ecclesiastical and political history show that the saints' predictions of the political future of the kings and their dynasties, whether they are established in power or barred from power, are part of the divine plan.

Because the miracles demonstrate that the saints who perform them act with divine authority, the miracles likewise show that the actions of the saints with regard to political and ecclesiastical power are also divinely ordered. That is to say, when Cogitosus reports Brigit's foundation of Kildare as the primatial see of Ireland (see above, Ch. 2 "Seventh-Century Ireland") the miracles she performed guarantee the divine origin of the foundation. When he shows Patrick prophesying the rise of the Uí Néill and the decline of Loíguire's sept, Muirchú likewise argues that the political reality of the seventh century was divinely ordained.

The main historical figures whose place in the *Lives* we will examine here are the fifth-century king Loíguire, whose interactions with Patrick are a major part of Muirchú's *Life* and Diarmait mac Cerbaill, of the sixth century, whose importance as the last pagan Uí Néill king makes the saints' interactions with him significant. These two royal figures were members of the Northern Uí Néill dynasty that was so intimately associated with Armagh and its patron, St. Patrick (see Ch. 2). Loíguire's date in the fifth century associates him with Patrick's initial mission and he is a major character in Muirchú and Tírechán. Diarmait was the major figure in the sixth century, during the Uí Néill consolidation of their power in Brega and Tara, and was involved with the political conflicts between the branches of the dynasty in which Columba was concerned. Additionally, some material from the anonymous *Lives* from the "O'Donoghue Lives" appears in this chapter, dealing with the establishment of Patrick's authority over Ailbe, one of the pre-Patrician saints (see above, Chapter 5) and the King of Cashel.³⁵⁵ Diarmait appears in the *Life of Ruadhán* as a major character. These are the kings most often

³⁵⁵ For the "O'Donoghue Lives," see Sharpe, *Saints' Lives*, and Chapter 1 above.

appearing in the sources, and are the predecessors of the political and ecclesiastical actors of the seventh century.

1. Miracles

Miracle stories in Irish saints' *Lives* function both to guarantee the sanctity of the saints and to guarantee the rightness of the ecclesiastical and political order which they support.³⁵⁶ Because the saints are in touch with eternity they act and speak with divine sanction; therefore their visions of the future and their blessings or curses of the dynasts in the *Lives* become uniquely authoritative. The actions of the saints create the world of the seventh century and give it divine sanction. For instance, the story of Patrick freezing wine that contained poison infused by his druidic opponents at Loíguire's court shows his saintly power, both because he can command physical reality and because he knows the reality of the drink beneath its appearance.³⁵⁷ By showing his power through his earlier miracle he ensures that his words have authority when he predicts the failure of

³⁵⁶ For this phenomenon in France, see Fouracre and Gerberding, *Late Merovingian France*, 26-58. The chapter in their introduction on sources details the way that saints' lives were used to promote the cults of the saints within the Merovingian church. They refer to current events and political contexts but unlike the Irish lives we are studying here, they refer to saints who lived and died within living memory. Their ability to affect the historical view of the more distant past is limited.

³⁵⁷ Muirchú I.20.1-2: (1), Bieler 92-95: "Caenantibus autem omnibus ille magus Lucetmail, qui fuerat in nocturna conflictione, etiam in illa die sollicitus est extincto consocio suo configere aduersus sanctum Patricium, et ut initium causae haberet, intuentibus aliis inmisit aliquid ex uasse suo in poculum Patricii, ut probaret quid faceret.(2) Vidensque sanctus Patricius hoc probationis genus uidentibus cunctis benedixit poculum suum et uersus est liquor in modum gelu et conuerso uasse cecidit gutta illa tantum quam inmisserat magus, et iterum benedixit poculum, conuersus est liquor in naturam suam et mirati sunt omnes."

Loíguire's offspring to retain his power as kings.³⁵⁸ His words themselves simultaneously explain (in historical terms) and cause the absence of the family from the kingship in the seventh century.³⁵⁹ In a similar way the *Lives* create the past of Ireland as it was seen in the seventh century by showing the saints operating in earlier centuries and establishing the historical reality that becomes the accepted story. The miracle stories establish the power of the saints that guarantees the political stories: by performing miracles in the mundane world the saints show that they operate also in the divine realm, which is the source of their power.

The miracle stories demonstrate the power and authority of the saints in the temporal world in specific ways. The authors were conscious of the distinctions among them: Adomnán, in his *Vita Columbae*, divides the miracles performed by Columba into three books, corresponding to the three types of miracle:

...I shall present briefly to the eager readers, as a kind of *hors d'oeuvre*, some of his miracles which will be described more fully below divided among three books, of which one will contain prophetic revelations, the second the miracles of divine power effected by him, and the third, angelic apparitions and manifestations of the heavenly light (shining) above the man of God.³⁶⁰

³⁵⁸ For the prediction, see Muirchú I.21 (20), Bieler 96-99: “et ait sanctus Patricius ad regem: ‘Quia restitsti doctrinae meae et fuisti scandalum mihi, licet prolongentur dies regni tui, nulus tamen erit ex semine tuo rex in aeternum.’”

³⁵⁹ For the anecdote of the poison, Muirchú I 20 (19), Bieler, 92-93; for Loíguire's offspring, I 21 (21), Bieler 98-99. Further, see Bieler's comments, 205: in fact, Loíguire's son did succeed to the kingship, but in the seventh century no kings were of his seed. Muirchú is writing from his own present perspective.

³⁶⁰ Adomnán, *DVC, praef. secunda*, Anderson and Anderson 4-6: “. . . de miraculis eius succincte quaedam quasi legentibus auide praegustanda ponam, quae inferius per tris diuisa libros plenius explicabuntur; quorum primus profeticas reuelationes, secundus uero

That is to say, the saint sees truth behind appearances, i.e. prophetically; the saint can alter the nature of reality by performing miracles of power; and the saint can interact directly with the Neoplatonic world of ultimate reality, i.e. heaven, as represented by the angelic apparitions and divine manifestations. Within those broad categories, Adomnán relates the miracle stories without concern for chronology. Although each of these types of miracle is directed towards heavenly reality, they can each be applied to the historical reality of early Ireland as well. The saint in the fifth or sixth century sees the present or future circumstances of individual kings and dynasties; the saint can blast the kings with power; the saint can see the circumstances of each dynasty in the seventh century *sub specie eternitatis*. This is particularly important in the *Lives* written in Ireland, since, unlike contemporary *Lives* from the continent, they are set in the relatively distant historical past (see chapter 3, “The *Lives* in Hiberno-Latin Literature”). What the saints did in the past creates the present of the *Lives*.

Both the authors of the *Lives* and their audience knew that the world of reality, i.e., heaven, is behind and interpenetrates the mundane world of appearances. Thus any event that occurs in this world is an image or sign of eternal reality. The holy man (following Patricia Cox) is the one who is able to have visions of demons and angels and of other places and times.³⁶¹ But the whole world—the whole of sensible creation—is a sign of the eternal reality. Every event reflects or stands for something else. The plane of

diuinas per ipsum uirtutes effectas, tertius angelicas apparitiones continebit et quasdam super hominem dei caelestis claritudinis manifestationis.

³⁶¹ See Patricia Cox *Biography in Late Antiquity: A Quest for the Holy Man*. (Berkeley: 1983).

the world stands in a semiotic, tropaic, allegorical, and analogical relation to the divine plane. Thus every statement, action, event, or story is allegorical and semiotic and not only *may* be interpreted but *must* be interpreted. They are images of something else and are not understandable simply as reports of events. Since the writers of our saints' *Lives* were in the habit of interpreting scripture in the moral or allegorical sense, rather than the literal or historical (however much the Irish may have gone in for "historical" readings of scripture, the other was more indicative of habits of thought), the way that they wrote things would most typically fall into the same pattern.³⁶² The saints' *Lives* take tropes, metaphor, and analogy and make them literally true.

While it is true that imperial biographers such as Suetonius take considerable pains to research facts (for instance, the early life of the emperor Augustus in *Aug.* 7.1) their ultimate purpose is moral: they are concerned with establishing a character rather than telling what actually happened in the past. The saint's character in a *vita* approaches the divine and hence acquires attributes that also are quasi-divine; his or her character is therefore not subject to the laws of nature or of temporality. The attributes or virtues of the saint are described symbolically through the use of miracle stories which demonstrate the intervention of the supernatural power of God in the world of mundane appearances. Miracles in these *Lives* are pieces of eternity that the saints are able to insert into the mundane world; while the writers of the *Lives* use miracles to construct a past, in a real way the miracle is outside of the world. The miracle stories in the saints' *Lives* are all allusions to the real world of supernature: nothing in them is transparent but everything

³⁶² See Beryl Smalley, *The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1952) and Thomas O'Loughlin, *Early Medieval Exegesis in the Medieval Latin West: Sources and Forms* (Farnham, Surrey, England: Ashgate, 2013).

must be interpreted, both by the saint within the story itself, and by the reader of the literary work. Everything in the *Lives* stands for something else; everything in this world is capable of becoming something else in eternity. Appearance is not reality in these works.

2. Miracles are guarantees of sanctity because they are part of eternity.

The seventh century in Ireland shows a great outpouring of literary activity. In Latin there is a considerable corpus of texts in addition to the saints' *Lives*. Irish writers were composing computistics, biblical studies and grammar, ecclesiastical legislation, and hymns and other poetry.³⁶³ Similarly, there are many texts in Old Irish including hero tales of the kings or of the native heroes, poetry, both secular and religious, genealogy, and very extensive legal writings, as well as religious prose works such as the *Cambrai Homily*.³⁶⁴ However, there is no text that is a narrative history.³⁶⁵ The only texts with a claim to representing a historical narrative are the *Annals*, beginning to be written at this stage, the *Genealogies*, also contemporary in some form, and the saints' *Lives*. *Annals* and *Genealogies* are of course historical in content but scarcely create a coherent

³⁶³ See *BCLL*, pages 77-157, #288-615.

³⁶⁴ See Myles Dillon, *Early Irish Literature*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948) xi-xix; James Carney, "Language and Literature to 1169," in *NHI* 452-510, The *Cambrai Homily* is printed in *Thesaurus Palaeohibernicus: A Collection of Old-Irish Glosses Scholia Prose and Verse*. Edited by Whitley Stokes and John Strachan (Cambridge, 1903), vol. 2, pp. 244-247. It is the earliest extended text extant in Old Irish, dating to the seventh century. Its dialect and orthographical conventions suggest that Old Irish was already a fully developed literary language.

³⁶⁵ Heffernan, *Sacred Biography*, 66-67 for the distinction between biography and *historia*. The distinction is quite clear in Classical historiography but becomes muddier in Christian literature; "*historia*" is sometimes used as the MS title of saints' *Lives*.

narrative. Saints' *Lives* are meant to be read at least somewhat as accounts of historical events: in the next century in Northumbria (much influenced by the Irish intellectual world) Bede composed his *Historia Ecclesiastica* using many of the same materials as the saint's *Lives* writers did, as well as a remarkably sophisticated saint's *Life* of his own: the *Vita Cuthberti*.³⁶⁶

In their avoidance of narrative history the seventh-century Irish were typical of the early medieval literary world in which they found themselves: like their continental models they wrote saints' *Lives* instead of history. Like *Lives* from the contemporary continent, the Irish *Lives* have many references to kings and other political figures, to the fate of dynasties in the dramatic time of the saints in the seventh century, to battles, and to other events of the past. The saints' *Lives*, then, are a very significant part of the management of the past by the intellectual class of the seventh century. Whenever we read the name of a king or dynast in the text of a saint's *Life*, as we do frequently, we are seeing the management of the Irish past in action.

The writers' sense that they were including material that had significant connections to the national past appears in certain features that recur in many of the texts. These *Lives* typically begin with an account of the parents and sometimes of the more

³⁶⁶ On Bede as a historian, see Alan Thacker, "Bede and History," in *The Cambridge Companion to Bede*, ed. Scott DeGregorio (Cambridge, 2010) 170-89. Bede's *Life of Cuthbert* is particularly interesting, since he uses the same historical methodology he uses in his *Historia Ecclesiastica*, interviewing witnesses and discussing and evaluating his sources. Bede's procedure here is connected to the fact that he was writing the life of a near contemporary; in Ireland, the *Lives* are written about figures from the more distant past and such source criticism was not possible for the writers. See below.

distant ancestors of the saint.³⁶⁷ The main thing that distinguishes the mention of parentage in saints' *Lives* from lists of ancestors in the *Genealogies* is the inclusion of coherent storytelling. The *Genealogies* typically are no more than lists of names, but the saints' parentage in the *Lives* is told in full narrative sentences even if the information that is actually included is no fuller than in the lists in the *Genealogies*.³⁶⁸ Similarly, the short notes of events in the *Annals* contrast with the stories about historical events in the *Lives*. The latter are integrated into a narrative, both on a small scale and as a fairly long narrative arc.³⁶⁹ The short miracle tales in the *Lives* are little different from the long narratives in that they both show the saint operating in the world of the miraculous. The *Annals* have none.

³⁶⁷ As an example, see Heist, p. 131, *Uita Prior Sancti Lugidi seu Moluae* 1: "Sanctus Lugidus de genere Corchode, Nepotum Fithgenie, oriundus fuit. Cuius pater uocabatur Carthach, filius Daigri; mater uero eius Sochla de Dail Birnn Osrighi duxit genus." The author then gives information about Lugidus' brothers as well. In the *Lives* by named authors, see in Muirchú I.1 Bieler 66-67, an account of Patrick's ancestors, expanding on Patrick's own *Confessio* 1; Cogitosus 1.1; Adomnán *DVC*, *secunda praefatio* 4a, p. 6-7.

³⁶⁸ See *Corpus Genealogiarum Sanctorum Hiberniae*. ed. Pádraig Ó Riain. (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1985). The genealogy of Aid of Killary is actually fuller in the *recensio maior* of the *Genealogies*: "Epscop Aed m. Brice m. Cormaic m. Crimthaid m. Fhiachach m. Néill Noigiallaig . . ." (Ó Riain 4). The account in the *Vita Aidi* (Heist 167 = *Uita Aidi* 1) is also informative, especially of Aid's maternal ancestry (Aidus sanctus spiscopus, qui vocatur filius Bricii, de Nepotibus Néill oriundus fuit. Mater vero sanct Aidi, de genere Munnensium, de genere Muscrigi Thire originem duxit). More ancestors appear in the *Genealogy* including the complete descent from Niall; the *Vita* only says that he was one of the Uí Néill.

³⁶⁹ See for instance the extensive tale of Patrick's conversion of Loiguire in Muirchú, discussed below. Muirchú goes on for twelve pages of Latin text in Bieler's edition (chapters I.10-21, Bieler 74-98). The *Annals of Ulster* say nothing specific about Loiguire's conversion. He is noted as celebrating the *feis Temro* in 454 and died in 461 (*AU s.a.* 461: Loeghaire filius Néill post cenam Temhro annis .uii. et mensibus .uii. et dies .uii. uixit.).

The miracle stories in the *Lives* are not tied to a rigid chronology. The *Lives* generally begin with the saint's ancestry and birth and end with his or her death but in between chronology is practically abandoned. Even in the case of Adomnán's *Life of Columba*, in which several otherwise attested, and datable, historical events are part of the narrative, chronology is not important. The arrangement of miracle stories in many *Lives* follows Adomnán's pattern, in that miracles of particular sorts are put together rather than having the *uita* follow the saint's *Life* chronologically. However, the abandonment of chronology has a purpose in thought as well as simply in organization of literary material. We see in this a contrast drawn between the apparent instability of the world of appearances, and the real unchanging stability of the sphere of the divine. When the two meet, this mundane world is completely destabilized, both physically and temporally; hence, chronology becomes irrelevant and history practically impossible.

Saints' *Lives* are therefore radically anti-chronological. The world inhabited by the saints is portrayed as close to the world of eternity and so is not subject to mundane human temporality.³⁷⁰ The anecdotal approach of ancient biography is thus adapted to a new context, and the literary form functions as part of the content. Hiberno-Latin writers of saints' *Lives* constantly use phrases like "alio autem die," or "alio quoque tempore," but these are not imprecise indications of time, but rather deliberate indications that these events are outside time.³⁷¹ For the saints, time does not really exist. We find saints sailing

³⁷⁰ See H. Delahaye *The Legends of the Saints*, tr. D. Atwater (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1961) in general, and Heffernan, *Sacred Biography* 92-99.

³⁷¹ An example of this tendency appears in the *Uita Prior Sancti Lugidi seu Moluae* in Heist, 131-45. Chapters 2 through 11 (with the exception of c. 9) begin, in order, with these words: "quadam ergo die... alio quoque die...quadam quoque die...alio autem

through eternity.³⁷² Both Brigit and Saint Aed of Killary arranged matters once, that a field being reaped was not rained on when all the land around it was being drenched.³⁷³ These saints are outside of and above the natural world of change. This is why a biography of a saint like Aidán of Ferns can go from a series of miracles during his life to an account of several he performed after his death without taking any notice at all of his dying: he is not part of the natural world of change.³⁷⁴ Even more radically, Adomnán's *Life of Columba*, after introducing the work in two prefaces and a summary chapter (I.1), begins with a miracle of prophecy; the story of Finten occurs after the saint's death. Thus the saint's *Life* begins after his death.

3: Power over the physical world, transformations, and healing

tempore...alio autem die...alio die...quadam die estiuo (a remarkable precision in the context!)...alio autem die...quadam autem die.” This is typical. Further examples would be tedious to relate. All of our texts demonstrate this way of identifying, or ignoring, chronology.

³⁷² Adomnán *DVC* 2.12 and 13, accounts of miracles Columba performed while on the sea. In summary, “eiusque orationem exaudiente domino ilico tempestas cessavit, et mare valde tranquillaum factum est.”

³⁷³ Cogitosus 5. Heist 170, *Uita Aedi* 10: “per totam diem pluuiā circa segitem undique per circuitum descendebat, in segite uero etiam una gutta non cecidit.”

³⁷⁴ Heist, 247; *Vita Sancti Aidani seu Maedoc* 52-53. A miracle of healing in c. 52 tells of a *paralyticus* who is healed by St. Aidán, who travelled through space without touching the earth, and the man was healed when he touched the saint's body. In the chapter immediately following (tempore etiam quodam), a certain *languidus* called Finanus “In festiuitate sancti Moedoc [=Aidán] in uisione uidit currum mirabilem de celo descendentem ad ciuitatem sancti Moedoc . . . in quo erat senex uenerandus, pulcherrimo aspectu et habitu clericali et clarissima uirgo palliata cum eo . . . cumque languidus interrogasset qui essent, respondit clericus, ‘Ista est beatissima uirgo Brigida, domina Hybernensium; ego autem sum seruus Christi Maedoc. . .’” There is no indication between the two stories of Aidán/Maedoc's death. Both are stories of supernatural appearances of the saint, but the condition of his body (alive or not) is not pertinent.

The miracle stories acquire their force from their presentation of a mundane world in which everything is indeterminate and fluid: the saints are able to find reality and stability in the midst of the instability because of their special relationship to celestial reality. The sensible world is so far destabilized that it cannot keep its shape; instead, the world of truth and of reality keeps breaking through mundane appearances. Things cannot retain their shape when confronted by the sphere of the divine; saints seem to be able to transform some things into other things, but in fact the saint is simply bringing divine reality into mundane reality, where the thing transformed ultimately appears to be what it actually is. Two examples will indicate something of this, both from the anonymous *Lives*. They deal with dietary problems during Lent. Once when St. Aed was on Inisbofin, he found that there was nothing to eat during Lent but meat; upon his blessing it, it turned into bread, fish, and honey. The meat therefore followed the needs of the holy man, instead of following its earthly nature.³⁷⁵ A similar event occurred at the need of St Ruadhán; but in his case, when a sinner was eating the transformed meat in the form of bread, it appeared to all of the observers that he was eating raw, bloody meat. It even stained his clothing.³⁷⁶ The point is that in the operation of miracles by the saint, it is the sacred that shows stability among the flux of temporality; but when a sinner is a participant, he is too much held by this world to participate in the true stability of heaven.

Not only sinners are bound by this world, of course. Anyone or anything not specially touched by the divine will show the effects of temporality. Adomnán tells of a

³⁷⁵ Heist 180, *Uita Aedi*, c. 45: “Aedus cum humilitate suscepit et benedixit carnes in mensas, et facte sunt panes et pisces et fauus mellis.”

³⁷⁶ Heist, 166-67, *Uita Ruadháni* c. 15: “. . . omnes fratres uiderunt panem quem ipse laicus edebat, quod caro cruda et sanguinea esset.”

special manuscript, of which a single page had been written by Columba himself. One time, somebody dropped the book into the Boyne, where it lay for 20 days until recovered. The page from Columba's hand was entirely unaffected by the immersion, while the whole rest of the book was destroyed: it was "putrefacta." This fact therefore shows Columba's great sanctity; his hand has such an effect that the page touched by it was incapable of being affected by mundane reality.³⁷⁷

Brigit was especially fond of substantial change, often of very homely things, too. One time she gave away some butter to beggars who asked, but then was left with even more than she had had before. This is a typical topos—the increase of foodstuffs, based ultimately on the multiplication of the loaves and fishes. Again, Brigit's sanctity is shown by the fact that on the day of her religious profession, when she touched a wooden pillar, the base of the altar in the church, it took root and bloomed. The saint's sanctity thus transformed the dead wood and caused a miracle of growth and life as a symbol of her new life in eternity. More than that, since "up to today" according to Cogitosus, "it drives out sickness from the faithful," the miraculous tree can transform sickness into health.³⁷⁸

Miracles of healing should really be viewed as another type of transformation, a power over the physical world. In the seventh-century texts healing is a miracle of power, showing the saints' sanctity through power over physical reality. A healing miracle of Brigit's is thus a display of power and is meant to increase faith, such as in this example.

³⁷⁷ Adomnán *DVC* 2.8, (Anderson and Anderson 104-105), and see c. ii. 9, p. 106-07 for two similar miracles.

³⁷⁸ Cogitosus (Connolly and Picard 2.2-3; *PL* LXXII, 779 A): "fundamentum ligneum, quo altare fulciebatur, tetigit. Quod lignum . . . usque ad praesens tempus viride, ac si non esset excisum, et decortcatum, sed in radicibus fixum uiresceret; et usque hodie languores et morbos de hominibus expellit fidelibus." See Liam de Paor, *Saint Patrick's World* (Dublin: Four Courts Press 1993) 209.

One of her nuns, guilty of unchastity, was discovered to be pregnant. Brigit blessed her and all of a sudden she was miraculously without child; it simply vanished entirely, in order to show, according to Cogitosus, that “all things are possible to those that believe.”³⁷⁹ At another time she healed a girl dumb from birth, but again the deed had a religious significance. The cure worked thus: Brigit said, “What would you rather do, my daughter: remain a virgin for God, or get married?” The girl replied with the first words she ever spoke (hence with significant words): “Whatever you say to me, mother, is what I want to do.” She became a nun, “et multum eloquens erat” (*Vita* IV. 2.91).³⁸⁰ St. Aed once prayed for a queen of Tara who was sterile, with such effect that she gave birth to several supernatural signs before she finally bore her child: first, she gave birth to a lamb, “quasi ad consecrandum uterum sterilis;” then, a fish made of silver, that she shared between the church and the poor; finally her son, another Aed, the future king Aed Slane (son of Diarmait mac Cerbaill, see below).³⁸¹ Finally, Saint Aidán was confronted with a man pretending to be blind in order to trick the saint into showing that he did not really have knowledge of reality. The man miscalculated: Aidán did know, and to make the deception into reality, struck the man blind for real.³⁸² Causing physical disease is really the same thing as a miracle of healing: it indicates power over the physical world of people's health. Ultimately, it includes miracles of resurrection in which the natural order

³⁷⁹ Cogitosus, c.9.1 [this miracle is redacted from the *PL* edition.] See de Paor, *Saint Patrick's World* 211; Connolly and Picard. “Cogitosus's "Life of St Brigit,” 5-27, at 16.

³⁸⁰ Sharpe, *Saints' Lives*, 205 (*Vita IV S. Brigidae* 91).

³⁸¹ Heist 173, *Vita Aedi* 18. 2

³⁸² Heist 236, *Vita S. Aidáni seu Maedoc* 14.

is reversed for a while. Adomnán tells the story of Columba resurrecting the son of a family of Picts that he had just converted.³⁸³ In this case, Adomnán explicitly says that the miracle demonstrated the saint's power to pagan priests: "When the *magi* (magicians, that is pagan priests) saw that he was dying, they began to make fun of his parents with great remonstrance, and to glorify their own gods as being more powerful, and to belittle the God of the Christians as though he were the weaker one." Muirchú tells another story of Patrick speaking with a dead pagan.³⁸⁴ With all these stories, nature is overturned by supernature, the world of physical appearances by unseen reality.

4: Miracles of power over time, i.e. prophecy

Saints can prophesy because they are not bound by the limitations of time any more than they are by the apparent limitations of mundane physics. To the eye of the holy man, all times and all places are eternally present, as they are in the eye of God. This is Adomnán's explanation for Columba's ability to prophesy: "however he may have been absent in body, nonetheless, present in spirit, he was able to see deeds from afar," in time as well as in space.³⁸⁵

For example, Adomnán describes Columba's prophecy about a murderer. An evil man has just murdered a girl in the saint's presence. The saint reacted by speaking words that are partly prophecy, partly curse: "In the same hour in which the soul of the girl

³⁸³ Adomnán *DVC* 2.32, Anderson and Anderson 37-41.

³⁸⁴ Muirchú 2.2, Bieler 114-15.

³⁸⁵ Adomnán *DVC* 1.1, Anderson and Anderson 16-19.

whom he has slain ascends to heaven, let the soul of her slayer descend to hell.”³⁸⁶ The murderer fell to the earth dead at that moment.

Many of the saints' *Lives* contain prophecy; a few examples will suffice to make some points about it. Aed's mother, for instance, received a prophecy that if her child were born on the next day, he would be great.³⁸⁷ Believing this, she sits on a rock during labor to ensure his birth the next day. As a result, the rock now bears the mark made by the baby's head; moreover, as another effect of the power of the saint, water from this depression has curative properties. The other features of this tale reflect the power of the original prophecy. Adomnán devotes the entire first book of his *Life* to Columba's prophecies, Book 1; Book 2 is also full of prophecy as well as of miracles of power, and the final book, including “angelic visions” (explicitly “angelicis visionibus,” 3.1) also contains visions of the future, unavoidably. Being a saint entailed having the ability to prophecy.

The saints then have power over mundane reality and knowledge of all times: they are really part of the divine reality. In such a case, the saints have knowledge of the future and present of the political powers of the fifth and sixth century, and have the authority to speak prophecy. As we have seen, Muirchú and Tírechán give accounts of Patrick's prophecies about the future of Loíguire's and Coirpre's families in the politics of dynastic succession of the seventh century, and Adomnán shows Columba's similar visions of Irish politics.

³⁸⁶ Adomnán *DVC* 2.25, Anderson and Anderson 130-31. “Eadem hora qua interfectae ab eo filiae anima ascendit ad caelos anima ipsius interfectoris descendit ad inferos” (tr. Anderson and Anderson 231).

³⁸⁷ Heist 167-68, *Vita Aidi* 1.

5: Biblical Grounding

The saints acquire further authority from the literary backgrounds of their *Lives*. Throughout the saints' *Lives* miracles have specific biblical precedent, a guarantee that the saintly activity has divine sanction. This use of the Bible in literary terms in these saints' *Lives* is quite distinct from the interpretation of the Bible itself on an exegetical level. Scholarly writing on the Bible in the early medieval period interprets the sacred text in various ways; in the saints' *Lives* it serves as a figure for miraculous events in the saint's own time.³⁸⁸ The writers of the *Lives* see Holy Writ prefiguring the saint's miracles, and explicitly ask the readers to make the connection between the Bible and modern times. The most explicit statement of this in insular literature is in Gildas, where he tells us that he is using the Bible "as though a mirror reflecting our own life."³⁸⁹ His influence was such that the Irish writers of the next two centuries follow this approach.

It is common for Hiberno-Latin writers to see events in terms of the Bible: it is the vehicle for understanding specific saintly actions. Many miracles of substantial transformation (i.e., shape-shifting, see above) are based on biblical models. The changing of water into wine at Cana is a particular favorite. Adomnán tells of Columba doing it, with an explicit declaration that the performance of this miracle indicated that the saint was like Christ at the wedding feast of Cana: Columba, "blessed it (the water)

³⁸⁸ See Smalley, *The Bible*.

³⁸⁹"Ueluti speculum quoddam;" the complete quotation, from *De excidio Britanniae* 1.7, runs: "ista ego et multa alia ueluti speculum quoddam uitae nostrae in scripturis ueteribus intuens, conuertabar ad nouas, et ibi legebam clarius quae mihi forsitan antea obscura fuerant, cessante umbra ac ueritate firmius inlucescere." See Gildas, *The ruin of Britain* ed. Winterbottom, 88.

with faith, invoking the name of Jesus Christ, who transformed water into wine in Cana of Galilee.”³⁹⁰ The parallel is made explicit, emphasizing his closeness to divinity and so to the influence he can have on the mundane world.

Biblical prefiguring is one of the most important interpretive strategies in all of the seventh-century saints’ *Lives*. For Muirchú, it forms the major means of interpreting Patrick’s conflict with the druids. Patrick’s first Easter in Ireland is described as occurring in “nostra Aegipto;” Tara is “istorum Babylone,” and Loíguire is “Nabucodonossor.” Patrick’s forty day fast in Tírechán is described under a three-fold biblical type: Patrick is described as “Moysicam tenens disciplinam et Heliacam et Christianam.”³⁹¹ The readers’ understanding of Patrick’s position is conditioned and guided by the interpretation in biblical terms which is forced on them by the writer. The understanding of ultimate reality for the early Irish is seen as the understanding of scripture. In Adomnán’s account of the vision that Columba had of the Holy Spirit near the end of his life (3.18), mystical understanding is expressed thus: “...moreover...he saw, openly revealed, many of the secret things that have been hidden since the world began. Also everything that in the sacred scriptures is dark and most difficult became plain, and was shown more clearly than the day to the eyes of his purest heart.”³⁹² The understanding of the ultimate reality in which the saints participate is the understanding of scripture.³⁹³

³⁹⁰ Adomnán, *DVC* 2.1, Anderson and Anderson 95: “...inuocato nomine domini Iesu Christi fideliter benedixit, qui in Cana Galileae aquam in uinum conuertit...” Brigit also performs the same miracle; see Chapter 7 below.

³⁹¹ Tírechán c. 38.1, Bieler 152: “following the example of Moses, Elias, and Christ.”

³⁹² Adomnán *DVC* 3.18, Anderson and Anderson 209. “...multa quaedam...occulta ab exordio mundi arcana aperte manifestata videbat. Scripturarum quoque sacrarum obscura quaeque et difficillima plane et luce clarius aperta mundissimi cordis oculis patebant.”

6: Native Literary Models

Scripture is one of the literary models for saints' *Lives*, but in the Irish context there is more. During the seventh century Irish scholars were also writing down traditional lore in Old Irish. These works are intimately connected to the contemporary Latin works, and, in Nagy's words, formed "...a project dedicated in a truly catholic spirit to reconstructing from a seemingly discontinuous past a literary whole applicable to the present."³⁹⁴ The writers used native literature as they had the Bible. Many of the sagas that were written down for the first time in this early period show distinct similarities in style, content, and narrative, to the stories in the saints' *Lives*. In the first place, there is genealogical information at the start of both types of literature. The stories of the conception and birth of Conchobar, CúChullain and Deirdre in Old Irish are more elaborate than the stories of the birth of the saints in the *Lives*, but discussion of the ancestry and conception of heroes is important.³⁹⁵ In fact, conception and birth, accompanied by signs and wonders, is one of the accepted categories of traditional story listed by Old Irish scholars.³⁹⁶ Secondly, the story of saints riding in their chariots is

³⁹³ For a much fuller discussion of Muirchú's tale of Patrick and the druids, see below.

³⁹⁴ Joseph Falaky Nagy, *Conversing with Angels and Ancients: Literary Myths of Medieval Ireland*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997) 10.

³⁹⁵ For CúChullain's birth, the *Táin* has three different accounts. See Thomas Kinsella, tr., *The Táin: From the Irish Epic Táin Bó Cuailnge* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969) 23.

³⁹⁶ Proinsias Mac Cana, *The Learned Tales of Medieval Ireland*, (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1980).

analogous to the boyhood deeds of CúChullain. One day in Emain Macha, CúChullain is said to have heard the druid Cathbad say that that anyone who stepped into a chariot on that day would be known forever. Of course, the hero was compelled to mount a chariot after that, and went on to do great deeds on that day.³⁹⁷ In saints' *Lives*, we see saints also performing wonders with chariots. Muirchú's Patrick is a notable example. Muirchú tells several anecdotes of Patrick riding in his chariot and his relationship with his charioteer. The passage concludes with this:

(2) (Patrick's) charioteer came to him and told him he had lost his horses and lamented for them as he would lament for dear friends, unable as he was to search for them because he could not see in the dark. This aroused the charity of the kind father, Patrick, and he said to the weeping charioteer: 'God, a ready helper in trial, in inconvenient times, will send help at once, and you shall find the horses for which you lament.' (3) Then he pulled up his sleeve, stretched out his hand, and raised it, and his five fingers, like lights, lit up the surroundings, and in the light of (Patrick's) stretched-out hand the charioteer found the horses he had lost, and ceased his lamentation. However, the charioteer who accompanied him kept this miracle secret until Patrick's death.³⁹⁸

In the *Vita Aedi* St. Aed has a chariot in which he rides when he is in dispute with the King of Munster. The story, "...a veritable showcase of the motifs associated with heroic and saintly chariots and charioteering," also reflects the importance of the charioteer in

³⁹⁷ Kinsella, *The Táin* 84-92.

³⁹⁸ Muirchú, II.1-3, Bieler 114-17, with Nagy *Conversing with Angels* 124-32. The passage quoted: "(2) <Accedit> auriga, memorat equos amissos, quasi amicos caros planguit, quia illos quaerere tenebris arcentibus uisum non poterat. Inde pietas Patricii patris pii mota est et flebili aurigae dixit: "Deus in angustis, <in> inopportunitatibus adiutor promptus adiutorium praestabit et equos quos ploras inuenies". (3) Exhinc manum spoliens manica extensam eleuauit et quinque digiti sicut luminaria ita proxima quaeque inluxerant et per lucem extensae manus equos quos amisserat auriga soluto gemitu inuenit. Sed hoc miraculum auriga comes usque ad Patricii obitum absconderat."

contemporary society and literature.³⁹⁹ The explanations given in Latin saints' *Lives* of appearances from far off are analogous to the explanations of distant warriors by observers in Old Irish saga literature. In the *Táin* for instance, Mac Roth describes for Fergus all the groups in Maeve's army; it is not terribly different from a saint describing what he knows from afar.⁴⁰⁰

Aspects of contemporary Old Irish literature, then, are part of the intellectual world of the seventh-century Irish *intelligentsia*. Inclusion of these elements functioned much as the inclusion of biblical elements did: they place the miracle stories in the saints' *Lives* in the familiar intellectual world of their audience. The *Lives* of the early Irish saints show us a vision of the world that is heavily conditioned by the intellectual atmosphere in which they were composed: late Roman Augustinian Neoplatonism, and the metaphorical reading of the scriptures. But the saints' *Lives* are not philosophical or theological tracts: they do not show us the world plain, but by their concentration on miracles and visions, by metaphor, by demanding interpretation. The saints' *Lives* show the interpenetration of the mundane and the truly real; neither one stable in the presence of the other, but constantly flickering back and forth.

7: The Creation of the Past in Miracles

Miracle stories in the saints' *Lives* employ the common types of content that appear in all medieval writings about saints (they have supernatural powers and

³⁹⁹ Nagy, *Conversing with Angels*, 241. See 239-46 for his discussion of the entire *Vita Aedi* from the perspective of the figure of the charioteer.

⁴⁰⁰ Kinsella, *The Táin*, 225-35.

miraculous visions, they act with biblical precedents, and so on) in ways that create the Irish past for their readers. In an example from the anonymous *Vita Colmáni*, for example, the saint has a saintly “angelic vision” of the death of Pope Gregory the Great.⁴⁰¹ In the story, Colmán has many of the marks of sanctity: he has a vision which he must explain to his more mundane followers, he predicts the arrival of a pilgrim returning from Rome with the news, and finally he is equated with St. John the Evangelist. Thus the text of the *Life of Colmán* guarantees the position of the Irish church in the wider ecclesiastical world of sixth-century Europe. Because of Colmán’s power of vision and his identification with St. John, the Irish church becomes as powerful as the universal church.

A long tale describing a vision of St. Columba shows the connection of the saints to Irish politics. Adomnán tells of Columba’s vision of a glass book concerning the ordination of kings.⁴⁰²

⁴⁰¹ Heist, 215-16, *Vita Colmáni* 20.

⁴⁰² Adomnán *DVC* 3.5, Anderson and Anderson 188-91: “Alio in tempore, cum uir praedicabilis in Hinba commoraretur insula, quadam nocte in extasi mentis angelum Domini ad se missum uidit, qui in manu uitreum ordinationis regum habebat librum: quem cum uir uenerandus de manu angeli accepisset, ab eo iussus, legere coepit. Qui cum secundum quod ei in libro erat commendatum Aidanum in regem ordinare recusaret, quia magis Iogenanum fratrem ejus diligeret, subito angelus, extendens manum, Sanctum percussit flagello, cuius liuorosum in eius latere uestigium omnibus suae diebus permansit uitae. Hocque intulit verbum, ‘Pro certo scias,’ inquiens, ‘quia ad te a Deo missus sum cum uitreo libro, ut iuxta uerba quae in eo legisti, Aidanum in regnum ordines. Quod si obsecundare huic nolueris iussioni, percutiam te iterato.’ Hic itaque angelus Domini, cum per tres continuas noctes, eundem in manu uitreum habens codicem, apparuisset, eademque Domini iussa de regis eiusdem ordinatione commendasset, Sanctus, uerbo obsecutus Domini, ad Iouam transnauigauit insulam, ibidemque Aidanum, iisdem aduentantem diebus, in regem, sicut erat iussus, ordinauit. Et inter ordinationis uerba, de filiis et nepotibus pronepotibusque eius futura prophetizauit: imponensque manum super caput eius, ordinans benedixit.”

Another time, when the man we remember was staying in the Isle of Hinba, one night in an ecstasy of his mind he saw an angel of the Lord who had been sent to him. He had in his hand a glass book about the ordination of kings. When the venerable man had received it from the hand of the angel, he began to read it as he had been told by him. When he refused to ordain Aidán as king, according to what was commanded in the book (because he preferred his brother Iogenán), the angel suddenly put out his hand and smacked the saint with a scourge. Its livid scar in his side remained for all the days of his life. He then said this: “You surely know that I was sent to you by God with the glass book so that you ordain Aidán according to the words you read. If you do not want to follow this command, I’ll smack you again!

So, when this angel of the Lord had appeared for three nights in a row holding the glass codex in his hands and had commanded the same orders of the Lord regarding the same ordination, the saint, following the word of the Lord, sailed across to Iona. There he ordained Aidán, who arrived around those days, just as he had been told. And among the words of the ordination he prophesied regarding the future of his grandsons and great-grandsons; and he blessed him, placing his hands on his head while ordaining him.

The saint himself is overpowered by the divine will, even in a political context.

The story in Adomnán performs the same function as the stories in Muirchú and Tírechán. In all of these tales the current situation of kings and dynasties in the seventh century appears to be divinely ordained by the will of God in an earlier time. Any possible alternative (the continuing power of the family of Loíguire or the ordination of Iogenán in place of Aidán) is subject to a divine smackdown.

8: Saints and Dynasties.

Patrick and Loíguire

In the seventh-century *Lives* miracle stories establish the power of the saints; the saints use their power to create a world that is the fifth and sixth-century past. Sainly

power raises dynasties and throws them down, and grants divine sanction to centers of ecclesiastical power.

The world of the *Lives* of Patrick, Brigit, and Columba is the world of the northern half of the country, in political terms the land of the Uí Néill. The dynasty grew to prominence during the fifth century concurrently with Christianity. It comes as no surprise that the most important narrative account of a saint's historically significant encounter with a king and the consequent fortunes of the dynasty is Muirchú's account of Patrick's conversion of Loíguire mac Néill at the Feast of Tara, coinciding with Easter. Muirchú tells of Patrick's arrival back in Ireland after his enslavement and escape to Britain. Tara and the Uí Néill feature prominently in Muirchú's *Vita Patricii*, where we also find traces of Old Irish saga conventions, many miracle stories, and direct references to specific political leaders notionally of the fifth century. This is the only connected narrative we have of the arrival of Christianity in Ireland. The story is a dramatic one, certainly, and acknowledged as well told.⁴⁰³ The fact that it is a story that has no historical truth does not matter for us now; we are looking at it as a constructed way of understanding the past. Ó Cróinín makes the point that Muirchú's work "is a travesty of the man and his true sanctity...sometimes fine literature, but not history."⁴⁰⁴ This is true as far as it goes, but I would assert further that the work in fact *creates* the history of early Christian Ireland. The *Life* was never meant to be history in the modern sense; Muirchú writes in order to construct a narrative in which Patrick established the Uí Néill

⁴⁰³ So Ludwig Bieler, "The Place of Saint Patrick in Latin Language and Literature," 65-98; see also Ó Cróinín in "Ireland, 400-800," *NHI*. Nagy analyses the story at length, *Conversing with Angels and Ancients*, 80-100.

⁴⁰⁴ Ó Cróinín "Ireland, 400-800," *NHI* 387.

as the secular rulers and Armagh as the ecclesiastical center of all Ireland. Muirchú's account of the conflict between Patrick and Loíguire in the *Vita Patricii* is arguably the most successful rewriting of Irish history in any saint's *Life*. It has entered popular culture and, stripped of its miraculous details, is popularly thought to be essentially true (as appears in the homily in any church in Ireland on Saint Patrick's Day).

An examination of Muirchú's story will bring out features of his narrative that create a picture of Ireland's fifth-century past that was acceptable to his seventh-century readership. As soon as Patrick arrives in Ireland, druids announce his arrival to Loíguire (c. I.10). Muirchú's initial description of Loíguire's court establishes the political context in which Patrick would be working. Loíguire is a "rex ferox gentilisque," a genuine ruler equivalent to kings in continental kingdoms or to the Roman emperor (he is an *imperator* too). He is in control of the whole island (he is the "filius Neill, origo stirpis huius pene insulae.") The predictions of the druids about Patrick in the context of a saint's *Life*, guaranteeing in their content the saint's eventual victory over paganism, function exactly as the saint's own predictions would.

Muirchú is able to name some of Loíguire's magicians: Lucet Máel and Lochru. Their predictions are very explicit: Patrick's arrival will cause a revolution in Ireland, and attain nearly immediate success. The passage includes the famous *rosc* about Patrick (which appears in Old Irish in the somewhat later *Vita Tripartita*, itself largely derived from Muirchú).⁴⁰⁵ Thus even before the arrival of Patrick in Ireland his success is

⁴⁰⁵ I discuss this passage in Chapter 3 and Chapter 7 below. For the *Vita Tripartita*, a version of Muirchu in Old Irish with additions, Kathleen Mulchrone, ed. and tr., *Bethu Phátraic. The Tripartite Life of Patrick 1*. (Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, 1939).

assured. Whatever the actual situation over the succeeding centuries of pagan survival or the like, Muirchú guides his readers to a particular understanding of the immediate success of conversion, and he does so through the means of miraculous vision, in this case vouchsafed to pagan priests.

In the further narrative of Patrick's celebration of the Paschal fire and defiance of the king a more developed picture emerges of the political structure of Ireland at his arrival. The accuracy of Muirchú's picture is guaranteed in the text by his use of biblical frames of reference (see above) and by his use of native literary conventions and forms. The biblical references, together with the account of Patrick's heroic use of chariots and his adaptation of the native literary form of *rosc*, heighten the credibility of the account for the original audience of Irish intellectuals in monasteries who also were aware of traditional learning. The impression given by Muirchú is that Ireland under Loíguire was a unitary state that Patrick could convert in a moment, and that he had done so.

Ailbe and the King of Cashel

In chapter 5 we saw how Patrician writers like Muirchú concealed Patrick's predecessor Palladius in the Armagh-centric narrative they present. Writers of other saints' *Lives* likewise adjust their stories to include other pre-Patrician saints in the controlling Patrician narrative. St. Ailbe of Emly was supposedly one of the pre-Patrician saints from Munster (cf. above, chapter 2). As we have seen, an important part of the version of Irish history that emerged from seventh-century Armagh was the primacy of Patrick's evangelizing mission in the ecclesiastical history of Ireland and his consequent authority over any possible predecessors. The *Vita Albei* makes clear not only Ailbe's

temporal priority over Patrick and his saintly power acquired before Patrick's mission, but also his subordination to the authority of Patrick; Ailbe's authority as the patron of Cashel, the royal center of Munster, is explicitly granted to him by Patrick.⁴⁰⁶ The *Vita Albei* is composed of folkloric elements, and elements similar to tropes from Old Irish sagas. Ailbe was baptized by Palladius (c. 3) and was fostered by the Britons whom Palladius had brought with him on his supposedly abortive mission; when Palladius's mission failed, they brought him to Britain and thence to Rome (c.4). In Rome, among many other miracles, Ailbe became leader of a group of one hundred Irish students by becoming their cook and providing a never-ending feast (c. 15), in parallel to the stories of feasting in Old Irish literature. For instance, the story from the Ulster Cycle of tales, *Bricriu's Feast* gives an account of the contest among several heroes for precedence at the feast; likewise, *The Tale of Mac Da Thó's Pig*.⁴⁰⁷ The feast is a significant *topos* in Irish literature, and the account in the *Life of Ailbe* reflects that. Eventually he asked Pope Clement for episcopal ordination (a neat trick since Clement was St. Peter's third successor in the first century and so had been dead already for centuries); the pope demurred because Ailbe was too holy for a mere pope to ordain and so an angel did the job.⁴⁰⁸ Ailbe performed many other miracles on the continent and then eventually returned to Ireland to perform yet more, and there he eventually submitted to Patrick. The

⁴⁰⁶ Heist 125, *Vita Albei* c. 29.

⁴⁰⁷ Both these stories are translated in Jeffrey Gantz, ed. *Early Irish Myths and Sagas*. (Harmondsworth: Penguin UK, 1981): 219-55 ("Bricriu's Feast") and 179-87 ("The Tale of Mac Da Thó's Pig").

⁴⁰⁸ Heist 122, *Vita Albei* 16. The angel who presided over the ordination is called Victor, presumable the same angel as the one who appeared to Patrick in *Tírechán* 1.4.

tales of his miracles preceding his encounter with Patrick (cc. 18-22 on the continent, 22-28 in Ireland) establish Ailbe's sanctity and thus show how much greater Patrick's authority was, since the holy Ailbe submitted to him.

When Ailbe met Patrick, in Cashel, he submitted immediately but was given dominion over Munster and their king Aengus.

After this Saint Ailbe made a circuit of Ireland. When he came to Cashel, he found Patrick there with King Aengus. Then Patrick offered Ailbe the whole population of Munster for him to be their father, and gave King Aengus into Ailbe's hand.⁴⁰⁹

Immediately before his meeting with Patrick, Ailbe met King Aengus, who mentioned that he had two horses that had just died, and Ailbe resurrected them. Here we see again that Ailbe is part of the world of early Ireland in which chariots and horses are important. In the chapter following his initial meeting with Patrick, Ailbe and Patrick again interact. Patrick's woman slave had given birth to an illegitimate son, and could not identify his father. Ailbe outdid Patrick: he baptized the child and asked him who his father was. The child walked right over to Patrick's charioteer and called him "pater meus."⁴¹⁰ These stories place Ailbe and Patrick firmly in the secular context of fifth-century Ireland as seen from the perspective of the seventh.

The real significance of the *Life of Ailbe* lies in the political implications in the seventh century. In the *Vita Albei* the saint is portrayed as particularly holy and powerful,

⁴⁰⁹ Post hec sanctus Albeus circumibat Hyberniam. Cumque uenisset Casselum, inuenit ibi Patricium et regem Engussum. Tunc Patricius obtulit Albeo omnes viros Munnensium, ut esset eorum pater, et regem Engussum in manum Albei. (Heist 125, *Vita Albei* 29.)

⁴¹⁰ Nagy, *Conversing with Angels*, discusses this story in detail (228-32).

and a powerful miracle worker throughout his saintly career. He nevertheless ends up subordinated to Patrick: in other words, the ecclesiastical hierarchy of the south, Munster, is subordinated to the power of Armagh. The fact that Ailbe was a bishop in Ireland before Patrick and had authority independent of his (angelic authority as it happens) makes it even more significant that Ailbe was put below Patrick in power and authority.⁴¹¹ Further, we can see in the details of the story some other implications: that there had been a separate ecclesiastical structure in the south before Patrick; that Cashel was the leading site for Munster Christianity; that in the course of the early Christian centuries in Ireland, Munster became subordinated to Armagh.⁴¹² In seventh-century politics, such ecclesiastical subordination also implied the subordination of Cashel's Eoganacht kings to the Uí Néill. Despite Ailbe's own independent attainment of sanctity, the saint of Emly is subject to the saint of Armagh.

⁴¹¹ It is clear from the *Vita* that Ailbe is Patrick's inferior. When he does meet Patrick, in Cashel, he submits immediately but is given dominion over Munster and their king Aengus. (29). These elements establish an ecclesiastical world for the fifth century that, first, makes clear that Ailbe and other Christians were already in Ireland before Patrick; then, that they had independent authority; then that they subordinated their authority to Patrick. The events in Cashel seem to imply too that there was an acknowledged southern division to the church, distinct from the authority of Patrick. It seems, based on other sources, that Ailbe was perceived as predating Patrick. This is unlikely to have been that case: Byrne identifies him as a sixth-century figure (Byrne *Irish Kings and High Kings* 210). The purpose of the *Vita* is to subordinate Munster to Armagh ecclesiastically.

⁴¹² For Cashel as a Christian site, Byrne *Irish Kings and High Kings*, 72 and 184. It is plausible that Cashel, with its Latin name (*Castellum*) was a Christian establishment from the start.

Brigit and Kildare

Cogitosus in his *Life of Brigit* uses miraculous content to show Brigit's power in establishing Kildare as the supreme ecclesiastical foundation in Ireland, in opposition to the claims of Armagh. His text is explicit in its aims:

It is the head of almost all the Irish Churches with supremacy over all the monasteries of the Irish and its *paruchia* extends over the whole land of Ireland, reaching from sea to sea...It has always been ruled over in happy succession according to a perpetual rite by the archbishop of the bishops of Ireland and the abbess whom all the abbesses of the Irish revere.⁴¹³

As with the other saints' *Lives* he follows his assertions of the primacy of Kildare with a succession of miracles in chapters 1-31, culminating in a final account of one of the saint's post mortem miracles in c. 32.⁴¹⁴

This last miracle is the most elaborate and the most openly propagandistic. In the final section of the *Life* the author gives an extensive description of the church in Kildare that houses the remains of Brigit and her bishop Conleth and so contains their relics. Cogitosus speaks in detail of the architecture and decoration of the church, which was divided into separate sections for monks and nuns and which separated the laity from the religious. The church itself provided evidence for the status of Kildare, as Cogitosus makes clear:

⁴¹³ Cogitosus, *Praef.* 4 and 6, Connolly/Picard 11: "caput pene omnium Hiberniensium Ecclesiarum, et culmen praecellens omnia monasteria Scotorum, cuius parochia per totam Hibernensem terram diffusa a mari usque ad mare extensa est...Quam semper Archiepiscopus Hiberniensium episcoparum et abbatissa, quam omnes abbatissae Scotorum vnerantur felici successione et rie perpetuo dominantur." See Noel Kissane, *Saint Brigid of Kildare: Life, Legend and Cult* (Dublin: Open Air, 2017) 73.

⁴¹⁴ See Kissane, *loc. cit.*: "...he (Cogitosus) has not succeeded in welding his material into a continuous narrative." Nor would one expect him to have done so.

And who can express in words the exceeding beauty of this church and the countless wonders of that monastic city...it is a vast and metropolitan city...the treasures of kings are kept there; moreover it is looked upon as the most outstanding on account of its illustrious supremacy.⁴¹⁵

The miracle that shows the divine ratification of Kildare's status directly connects it to the church building. When the building was undergoing repair or reconstruction, the door which Brigit herself used when she was alive would no longer fit the reconstructed doorway, and the workman in charge was uncertain whether to construct a new door or add a board to the old one. He decided to pray to the saint overnight for guidance.

...getting up in the morning after that night, having completed his prayer with faith, he had the old door pushed in and placed on its hinges and it filled the whole doorway...And so Brigit extended the door in height so that the whole doorway was filled by it and no gap appeared in it except when the door was pushed back for people to go into the church. And this miracle of God's power was revealed clearly to the eyes of all who saw the door and the doorway.⁴¹⁶

⁴¹⁵ Cogitosus 32.8, tr. Connolly and Picard 26: "et quis sermone explicare potest, maximum decorem huius ecclesiae, et innumera illius ciuitatis qui dicemus miracula?...maxima haec ciuitas et metropolitana est...in qua seruantur thesauri regum."

⁴¹⁶ Cogitosus 32.6-7, tr. Connolly and Picard 26: "et mane surgens, oratione praemissa, ostium antiquum trudens ac ponens in suo cardine, ianuam conclusit totam...et sic sancta Brigida illud ostium extendit in altitudinem ut tota porta illa ab eo sit conclusa, nec in ea ullus locus patefactus uideatur, nisi cum ostium retruditur, ut ecclesia intretur. Et hoc uirtutis dominicae oculis omnium uidentium miraculum, illam ianuam et ualuam manifeste patet."

Thus Brigit showed by working a miracle that the cathedral church of Kildare was specifically favored by God and, by implication, that it was in Cogitosus's words, "the most outstanding on account of its illustrious supremacy."⁴¹⁷

Columba, Ruadhán, and Diarmait.

The accounts of Brigit and Patrick deal with the fifth century. The significant power struggle in the sixth century is the subject of other *Lives* of saints from that period. They too include accounts of miracles that establish that the political conditions of the seventh century were in accord with the divine will. The *Life of Ruadhán* in the section of the Irish Saints' *Lives* identified by Sharpe as early in date, as well as the *Life of Columba* by Adomnán create a coherent story of the reign of Diarmait mac Cerbaill of the Southern Uí Néill, in which saintly miracles feature prominently. Diarmait was a significant figure in the history of the Uí Néill ascendancy in Mide and Bregia. In some ways he can be seen as the last high king (*ard-ri*) to preserve some pre-Christian aspects of the kingship, such as the celebration of the Fair of Tara (*Feis Temro*: a ceremony led by the king of Tara and associated with paganism). Ruadhán's *Life* presents a context for the absence of Diarmait's descendants in a series of miraculous predictions about the political situation in the seventh century, predictions that acquire their force from the saint's ability to see the future as the present, *sub specie aeternitatis*. Adomnán in his *Life of Columba* makes reference to the political situation as well, but more obliquely: Diarmait came into conflict with Columba's own relatives of the Northern Uí Néill.

⁴¹⁷ Cogitosus 32.9, tr. Connolly/Picard 26: "et decorati culminis excellentissima esse uidentur."

Outside of the legends in the saints' *Lives*, the information we have regarding Diarmait from the *Annals* is slim and delivered with little contextualization or explanation. It is the saints' *Lives* that give a narrative of the king's reign and purport to explain historically the developments surrounding the kingship of Tara in the sixth century.

The *Annals* then do not give a very full account of the events of Diarmait's reign, or place them in a historical context. Some of the details from the *Annals* are suggestive: his successors are from the same dynasty, the Uí Néill, and he is explicitly named as the last king to celebrate the *Feis* of Tara. Moreover, the Battle of Cúl Dreimne was a very important defeat for the Southern Uí Néill and victory for the Northern Uí Néill. However, Byrne's assessment is valid: "The annalistic record is sparse but uniformly gloomy."⁴¹⁸

The *Annals* also note many other important things that happened during his reign, even if not in his realm. There were several plagues (*AU* 545, 549, 554, 556). In ecclesiastical terms it was a period of monastic foundations, including the most important monasteries in early Ireland. Columba founded Derry in 546, Ciarán founded Clonmacnoise in 548, Comgall founded Bangor in 555 or 558, Brendan founded Clonfert in 558 or 564. Most significant but least noticed in the *Annals*, Columba founded Iona in 563. Byrne, in *Irish Kings and High Kings* devotes a full chapter to Diarmait but even there the information is largely derived from the *Annals*, and the chapter is more concerned with the interpretation of the sources than with an account of the events of the

⁴¹⁸ Byrne, *Irish Kings and High Kings*, 94.

540s-560s.⁴¹⁹ Rather, Byrne is concerned to situate Diarmait in the political milieu of the time. He does not attempt to use the sources to develop a full narrative history of the reign. A history of the reign based only on annalistic and genealogical sources will not be long or contain much historical information.

Indeed we can tease out information from the slim notices of events in the *Annals*. For one, Diarmait celebrated the last *Feis Temro*. Since it was in origin a pagan ceremony the fact that this was the last celebration does seem to reflect the increasing influence of Christianity in the sixth century.⁴²⁰ Diarmait's son, Aed Slaine, is identified as "totius scotiae regnatorem deo aucto ordinatum," connecting him, too, with the religious context.⁴²¹ The notice seems to imply that the religious foundation of the kingship shifted during Diarmait's reign from paganism to Christianity. The battles, of Cúl Dreimne and of Cúl Uínsen are also suggestive: Diarmait's allies and opponents in them tell us much about the political landscape. However, it must be said that many of the accounts of his reign that depend on the *Annals* alone are written in the subjunctive mood.⁴²²

What makes the reign of Diarmait come alive is the stories in the *Life of Ruadhán* and the *Life of Columba*, and the Irish language sagas in the *Cycle of the Kings*. The

⁴¹⁹ *ibid.*, ch. 6, "Diarmait mac Cerbaill and the Consolidation of Uí Néill Power," 87-105.

⁴²⁰ Hughes "The Church in Irish Society, 400-800," *NHI*, 301-30 at 321.

⁴²¹ Herbert. *Iona Kells and Derry*, 52.

⁴²² In a single paragraph dealing with Diarmait (*ECI* 294), Charles-Edwards uses these expressions: "a possible answer . . . probably. . . probably. . . is likely to have . . . may have been . . . the most likely interpretation."

saints' *Lives* purport, on some level, to be history; the sagas themselves also seem to ask us for some credence. Stories make the past comprehensible.⁴²³

In the case of the saint' *Lives*, the stories are a way of establishing the past of Ireland as the past of the Irish church. The interactions of the saints with secular leaders, namely the kings, are a way of seeing the past of Ireland as a form of ecclesiastical history. The ultimate purpose is to demonstrate the divine source of "the way things are." Therefore any alternative stories, such as may appear in the vernacular sagas, are dismissed or perhaps explained away. The saints' *Lives* create a past by telling a story, in contrast to the text of the *Annals*, which may indeed possess the bones of a story but does not have it yet.

Diarmait was important in the ecclesiastical history of Ireland. In the words of Mac Niocaill "Diarmait...was almost certainly a pagan—and perhaps some sort of Christian also...paying obeisance to the Christian god when life was quiet and undisturbed, but in times of stress calling on the gods of his ancestors."⁴²⁴ He had importance in the continuing evangelization of the country, and many of the references to him in saints' *Lives*, such as in Adomnán's *De Vita Columbae*, refer to his religious status. In the *Life of Ruadhán*, things are even more religiously centered. In that text, he and Tara are cursed by a committee of all the saints of Ireland.

⁴²³ Byrne cites the Old Irish saga sources for Diarmait, which appear in Myles Dillon, *The Cycles of the Kings* (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1946), and Standish Hayes O'Grady, *Silva Gadelica (I-XXXI): a Collection of Tales in Irish with Extracts Illustrating Persons and Places*. (London: Williams and Norgate, 1892).

⁴²⁴ Gearoid Mac Niocaill, *Ireland Before the Vikings* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1972), 26.

The seventh and eighth centuries, when all of our texts were written, saw the necessity of an agreed history of Ireland. The seventh century was the time when the Paschal Controversy came to a head. From the time of Columbanus and Cummin at the beginning of the century, through the decision at the Synod of Whitby in 664, this was the most significant disputatious issue the church faced. It was the issue around which churchmen formed opposing parties, and each of them wanted to establish its rightness. Here we see the results, if the dating of Irish saints' *Lives* is placed generally correctly after the Synod in 664. The settlement (or apparent settlement) gave rise to unity (or apparent unity), and the settlement was validated by the content of the *Lives*.

The narratives of Diarmait in the *Vita Ruadháni*, and of his predecessors in other *Lives* (e.g. Loíguire in Muirchú's *Vita Patricii*) are formed of stories that are analogous to the miracle stories in the same texts. These stories acquire power through their association with miracles. Since miracles show the power of the saint by his or her association with the supernatural world of heaven, so the kind of story that we see dealing with secular rulers also is associated with the divine power of the saints.

The author of the *Life* is creating a past for Tara. Ruadhán's prediction of the early decline of Tara ("The city of Tara will be empty for many centuries before that, and without inhabitants forever") is the kernel of the idea of the Cursing of Tara, familiar from Old Irish sagas and explains the eclipse of the family of Diarmait among the later high kings.⁴²⁵ The Uí Néill dynasty in the seventh century, and more in the eighth, was devoid of high kings who were descended from Diarmait. Diarmait also is very ambiguous in religious terms, and so his defeat in the war of words with Ruadhán shows

⁴²⁵Byrne, *Irish Kings and High Kings*, 95-95.

how paganism was defeated by Christianity. The fact that Tara was no longer of direct political importance as a site from the mid-sixth century (although the idea of the “Kingship of Tara” was definitely not so) is attributed to the words of the saint. The readers of this *Life* were already accustomed to reading the words of the saint as particularly significant and powerful.

That the Irish scholars of the seventh century created the Irish past is clear, and a commonplace. Their use of saints’ *Lives* is less appreciated. The picture of early Ireland that comes from a reading of the seventh-century saints’ *Lives* is much fuller than the exiguous notices of the *Genealogies* and *Annals*.

CHAPTER 7

ANGELS IN THE DETAILS: A CLOSE READING OF THE LIVES

In the previous chapters we have seen that the early Irish writers of saints' *Lives*, Muirchú, Tírechán, Cogitosus, and Adomnán, were involved in the political and ecclesiastical disputes of the seventh century. They wrote their works in order to promote their monastic communities or the kings who were their patrons. Muirchú and Tírechán wrote in the interests of Armagh, Cogitosus in the interests of Kildare, and Adomnán for Iona. The Paschal Dispute in particular required the different centers to boost the authority of their own patron saints, since being on the wrong side might bring accusations of heresy. We have seen the reasons that the writers chose the form of sacred biography, for its utility in intellectual conflict. We have seen the use that Irish writers made of saints' *Lives* from Francia: they were able to use the form for current political propaganda with the Frankish *Lives* as models. We have seen the way that the contents of the *Lives*, the miracles, present the saints as possessed of semi-divine power. We have not yet examined *how* the *Lives* operate as pieces of literature. They present the saints as holy and powerful, and so uniquely positioned to effect the creation of the Irish past and the seventh-century present; but how do the authors write so that their audience will accept the world they present? The answer to this question is the central point of the dissertation.

In this chapter, I argue that the saints' *Lives* create the Irish past in the seventh century by representing the words and actions of their saintly subjects and describing their interactions with political and ecclesiastical situations and persons in elaborately decorated language. Because of the elaboration of the language which the authors of the

saints' *Lives* employed, the words and actions acquire credibility and authority, since the decoration of the language indicates that the very words participate in the sphere of the divine. An examination of cumulated examples will bring out the features of style.

1: The Written Word

The writers of the seventh-century saints' *Lives* give authority to their writing by decorating their words in telling of the saint's miracles and their effects: they exploit the resources of the Latin language to create meaning and generate credibility in their texts. The words, by virtue of their being set apart by their sound and arrangement, become sacred and so participate in the world of eternity. We cannot exaggerate the importance of the language and of individual words in the intellectual world of early medieval Ireland, since after all the religion the Irish Christians professed made God of a Divine Word. The faith is founded on the Bible; the significance of the Bible is the grounding for the importance of books in general in the saints' *Lives* from early medieval Ireland. In Chapter 3, "The Lives in Hiberno-Latin Literature," I showed that the biblical grounding of material in Hiberno-Latin texts such as the saints' *Lives* is fundamental to their meaning. The written word acquires prestige simply by its association with the Bible: the first thing that happened when Patrick ordained a new priest was the bestowal of letters on him in the form of *abgitoria* or *elementa* (ABC primers). The saint appears in the text

as actually writing these books for the new priests: "and (Patrick) wrote an alphabet for him and blessed him with the blessing for a priest."⁴²⁶

Elementa or *abgitoria* may well have included more than the forms of the letters—a psalter or Mass book would be a necessity for a priest. For instance, Patrick gave seven books to Mucneus on his ordination.⁴²⁷ The ownership of these elements of writing was clearly a most important symbol of priestly authority and, more generally, of power. Patrick too, in writing and bestowing them, showed his own power and authority, in that he could give the elements of writing, that is, power, to others. Someone with books had power. In some circumstances, books did not even have to be read, simply possessed. For instance, the *Cathach* of St. Columba acquired its name from its use as a battle talisman.⁴²⁸ The power of the book as a physical object, though, is not separate from the power inherent in its text. The power and authority inherent in the word as such acquire strength by the word's appearance in the same form as the Bible and the texts for

⁴²⁶ Tírechán 43, Bieler 158-59, "et scripsit elementa (the letters), et benedixit eum benedictione prespiteri." See G. Márkus, "What were Patrick's alphabets?" *CMCS* 31 (1996), 1-15.

⁴²⁷ Tírechán, 42.7, Bieler 156-57.

⁴²⁸ The *Cathach* is a psalter of early date, said to have been inscribed by Columba himself. It is not likely. In later centuries it was in the possession of the O'Donnells who carried in its shrine in front of their army when in battle (hence its name from the Irish word "*cath*"="battle"). The *Cathach* of course is also a relic of the saint, and possessed of power because of that; the power of the word is operative also. See Kenney #454, pages 629-30. It is now in the library of the Royal Irish Academy. See *BCLL*, #506 and Kenney, #454. See also Caradoc's *Life of Gildas* (*BCLL*, #37, *MGH.*, *Auct. Antiq.* XIII, 107-10): Gildas wrote a gospel book by which Welsh kings swore oaths of peace, yet they never dared open it. Here we see the extraordinary power of the written word to guarantee the spoken oaths of men.

the sacraments. The power of the word literally underpinned the world of the Irish churchmen: Irish church dedications included writing an alphabet on the floor.⁴²⁹

The verbal style of the *Lives* increases the power of the word. The Latin literature of the seventh century in Ireland possesses a complex and dense style, quite distinctive and, in its totality, peculiar to its time and place. Features of the style include the use of alliteration and assonance; hyperbaton, sometimes quite violent; rhythmical prose and end rhyme. The literature is also quite allusive, constantly using the Bible, and occasionally other texts, as a touchstone.⁴³⁰ That the style of writing is distinctively Celtic (or at any rate insular) and is early medieval rather than late antique appears in the difference between the seventh-century saints' *Lives* and their formal source, Sulpicius Severus' *Life of Saint Martin*. Sulpicius' work is classicizing, using writers like, especially, Sallust or Tacitus as stylistic and generic models.⁴³¹

Hiberno-Latin writing is different. This is not to say, of course, that the style is restricted to Celtic writers in all its elements. The "jeweled style," as Roberts calls it, is common throughout Late Latin literature and continues in use into the early Middle Ages.⁴³² It is quite characteristic of Hiberno-Latin, but scarcely exclusively so.⁴³³

⁴²⁹ Dominique Barbet-Massin, "The Rite of Church Dedication in Early Medieval Ireland and the Dedication Scheme in the Angers Manuscript 477," *Peritia* 27 (2016): 11-30.

⁴³⁰ For the use of the Bible, the classic work by Smalley is essential: Beryl Smalley, *The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1952).

⁴³¹ So Stancliffe, *St. Martin*, 58-61 and 86-90 and Burton, *Sulpicius Severus' Vita Martini*, 31-32, and above, Chapter 4. The Roman historians do not appear to be direct sources for the later Irish writers.

⁴³² Roberts, *The Jeweled Style*; he describes the style through examples from Late Latin poetical texts that parallel features of Hiberno-Latin saints' *Lives*.

However, the way in which the Irish writers used the common literary inheritance is distinctive. The seventh-century writings after all include the *Hisperica Famina* which no one would ever consider typical of anything else, and the writers of the *Lives* all share some hisperic features.⁴³⁴ Hisperic Latinity is certainly insular in origin; so are the other stylistic features of Hiberno-Latin saints' *Lives*, and they function in a particular way.

The stylistic features of the writing create the universe in which the saints live and work. The words directly reflect the divine realm which they describe: the various features of style are demonstrations of supernatural connections and identities between the things, facts, or actions that appear in the text. Whereas the saints' actions in performing miracles or making predictions are a result of their own participation in the divine realm, the specific connections among ideas, events, and expressions drawn by alliteration or verbal parallelism guarantee to the reader that those connections are in fact real. The interpretation of the Irish past that the saints' *Lives* present is not just asserted by miraculous actions of the saints or by their predictive power, but is also guaranteed by the metaphysical reality demonstrated in the literary description of the saints' miraculous activity.

An example will be helpful to demonstrate how the style connects ideas. In Adomnán's *Life of Columba* I.40, a sinful priest offers Mass, and Columba remarks on the occult sin he alone can perceive:

⁴³³ Recent works that describe a similar style in works from outside Ireland include Burton, *Sulpicius Severus' Vita Martini* 40-80; Christopher Grocock, and Ian N. Wood, eds. *The Abbots of Wearmouth and Jarrow* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), lxiv-xcvi.

⁴³⁴ In Muirchú, while there is relatively little rhetorically that is hisperic, we do find odd words (see Bieler, *Patrician Texts* 19). Adomnán uses hisperic phrasing and rhetorical style more frequently. For Muirchú, see Anthony Harvey, "Muirchú and his remi cymba: Whence his Latin and its Wordstore?" *Peritia* 27 (2016), 43-62.

Munda et immunda pariter

nunc permixeri cernuntur.

Hoc est: munda sacrae oblationis ministeria
 per immundum hominem ministrata
 qui in sua interim conscientia
 aliquod grande occultat facinus.⁴³⁵

The structure of this miracle story is complex. The first two lines make a statement about what is hidden from sight and unknown. The next four lines (after *hoc est*) are the explanation (almost like a manuscript gloss in form).⁴³⁶ Both the words ending the first two lines are trisyllabic and rhyme according to Old Irish conventions (*pariter*, *cernuntur*, alliterating in *-t* and, internally, in *-r* at the end of the first syllable, and also rhyming in the final letter).⁴³⁷ Lines 3-6 are clearly a unit and meant to be read in the way that I have indicated in arranging them. Lines three, four and five show end-rhyme in *-a*

⁴³⁵ Adomnán, *DVC* I.40: “Clean and unclean equally/Are now seen to be combined together./ That is: the clean rites of the holy sacrifice/ Are administered by the unclean man,/ Who all the while in his own conscience/Hides some great sin.”

⁴³⁶ For MS glosses, see for instance Whitley Stokes and John Strachan, *Thesaurus Palaeohibernicus I, Biblical Glosses and Scholia* (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, repr. 1975, =*Thes. Pal.*). The well-known *Milan Glosses* which contain a great deal of Old Irish, show that sort of locution (i.e., *hoc est*, or *id est*) very frequently in a context that is contemporary with the *Lives* under consideration. One example among many is a comment on *Psalms* 7, “et sinagoga populorum circumdabit te.” The commentary on the Psalms is in Latin, and is itself glossed in Irish. The Latin gloss reads “erat iste mos apud filios Israhel ut ad sallendum concurrerent hi ad quorum spectabat officium. Hoc est ergo quod ait: facientes choros psalmos tibi consona uoce cantabimus, et altare tuum in modum coronae circumpositi ex omni parte cingemus.” See *Thes. Pal.* I, 41. The comment thus explains in other words the seemingly obscure statement of the psalmist. In the same way, in Adomnán’s text Columba explains the statement he has just made.

⁴³⁷ This would constitute a rhyme in Old Irish: see David Stifter, *Sengoidelc: Oold Irish for Beginners* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2006), 302-03.

and alliterate in *-m*. Moreover, the hyperbaton reinforces the theme of the clean and unclean being mixed together. Line three includes the adjective *munda* separated from its noun *ministeria* at the end by the phrase *sacrae oblationis*, also creating a chiasmus within the two phrases; the noun *ministeria* is modified by *ministrata* at the end of the next line as well (which not incidentally forms the rhyme with *ministeria* and alliterates with it, as well as making a *figura etymologica*) by the “*immundum hominem*,” who is in fact the unworthy priest. His guilty “*conscientia*” is implicitly connected with the “*ministeria...monstrata*” by rhyme and with the guilty sin (*facinus*) it is hiding.

This passage from Adomnán is a model for interpretation. The words Adomnán uses create the reality he is describing. Parallelism defines the sin, which Columba can see behind mundane appearances. The descriptive words in Columba’s initial statement alliterate and rhyme, and the rhyming phrases are both eight syllables. The interpretation he gives in the next section itself creates or reflects the mixing of clean and unclean elements.

The historical context of this story is also significant. Adomnán places it in Ireland rather than in Iona. Columba was visiting Ireland and had already made a prediction concerning a different unworthy cleric (1.38—see below for a fuller discussion of that passage). Both prophetic statements were made in the area called the Plain of Brega (*campum Breg*, 1.38) which lies within the territory of the Southern Uí Néill . Specifically, the location where Columba exposes the sinful priest is the monastery of Trevet in Co. Meath. It seems that Columba was visiting Ireland at this time in

connection with the foundation of his monastery in Durrow.⁴³⁸ It is not fanciful to see the story in the context of Columba's activity in the Uí Néill territory not only as a churchman but as a dynast.⁴³⁹ The unclean monk then may not simply be a person with a private sin, but might have been unworthy to celebrate the Eucharist for some more political reason.

Alternatively, we might see a context in ecclesiastical politics. The *paruchia* of Columba was very much involved in the politics of the Easter Controversy in the sixth century, the dramatic date of the story, and persisted in holding to their own customs into the seventh, when Adomnán was writing. As we have seen in Chapter 2, the dispute was a heated one. The monastery of Trevet was on the border between the south, following the way of the *Romani*, and the Columban north. Columba's condemnation of the priest may well have been a sign to those in the know that the opinions of the *Romani* were so repugnant as to render sacramental activity by such priests unclean.

Since much of the evidence I will be treating in this chapter consists of a detailed examination of the Latin text and its features, I have chosen to rearrange the text at some points as in the example above to bring out features of parallelism, rhyme, and rhetorical balance. The text is often arranged in lines as though it is verse, as indeed it is in many cases. The rhythmical portions of the saints' *Lives* are the Latin version of the Old Irish *rosc* verse form (on which see below). It should be stressed that none of the MSS of these texts arrange the words in this way. This does not necessarily mean that the scribes were

⁴³⁸ Adomnán, *Life of St. Columba*, translated by Richard Sharpe (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England ; New York: Penguin Books, 1991), 28.

⁴³⁹ Herbert, *Iona, Kells and Derry*, 31-2.

unaware of the fact that the words are part of a section in verse: several early medieval insular manuscripts (such as the unique MS of *Beowulf*) do not write poetry in lines even though the works they are copying clearly are verse..⁴⁴⁰

The verbal art of the *Lives* is a direct result of the reliance on the word. The words themselves reflect and indeed create reality. The verbal decorations are not simply pretty, but are essential to the meaning of the text. The technique of rhythmical and rhyming prose is found outside the saints' *Lives*, too. The elaboration of the style is characteristic of seventh-century Hiberno-Latin literature as a whole and developed earlier in the century when Columbanus and Cumman used the style of writing as a tool of controversy in the Paschal Dispute. The origins of this particularly insular way of writing go further back to their Hisperic teachers, or to Patrick and Gildas.⁴⁴¹

2: The Place of the Bible and Interpretation

The Hiberno-Latin writers understood ultimate reality through their reading of scripture. In Adomnán's account of the vision that Columba had of the Holy Spirit, near the end of his life (3.18), he describes the saint's mystical experience in this way:

⁴⁴⁰ No surviving manuscripts of Old English poetry inscribe the verse in lines. See, for instance, the Exeter Book and the *Beowulf* manuscript (BL MS Cotton Vitellius A.15). Anglo-Saxon scribes sometimes marked the caesurae or the ends of lines with a point. See O'Brien-O'Keeffe, Catherine, *Visible Song. Transitional Literacy in Old English Verse* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), and Daniel Paul O'Donnell, "Manuscript Variation in Multiple-Recension Old English Poetic Texts: The Technical Problem and Poetical Art," (PhD Dissertation: Yale University, 1996).

⁴⁴¹ Howlett, *Celtic Latin Tradition*, 72-81, on Gildas. Howlett makes the case that the later writers did in fact acquire their style from Patrick and Gildas, but does not talk about the decoration of the text in the way we are examining. See below for more discussion of Howlett's work.

“...moreover...he saw, openly revealed, many of the secret things that have been hidden since the world began. Also everything that in the sacred scriptures is dark and most difficult became plain, and was shown more clearly than the day to the eyes of his purest heart.”⁴⁴² Thus, the understanding of ultimate reality is the understanding of scripture and the understanding of scripture requires the understanding of the literary strategies involved in its composition.

The writers of saints’ *Lives* see Holy Writ as truly related to what they are doing, and explicitly ask the readers to make the connection between the Bible and modern times. The most explicit statement of this is in Gildas in the sixth century,⁴⁴³ Patrick, Gildas’s countryman, uses St. Paul’s *Epistles*, especially *II Corinthians*, as a direct referent for his own religious experience (see Chapter 2, above). The Irish writers of the next century follow this approach. For instance, Adomnán in his discussion of Columba’s name, gives the words for “dove” in Hebrew, Greek and Latin, the three biblical *linguae sacrae* of early Christianity.⁴⁴⁴ He discusses at some length the meaning of the name and emphasizes that it is not an accident that his saint was so named: “not...without divine

⁴⁴² Adomnán *DVC* 3.18, “...multa quaedam...occulta ab exordio mundi arcana aperte manifestata videbat. scripturarum quoque sacrarum obscura quaeque et difficillima plane et luce clarius aperta mundissimi cordis oculis patebant.”

⁴⁴³ He uses the Bible “ueluti speculum quoddam uitae nostrae,” “as though...a mirror reflecting our own life.” See the discussion of this passage above, Chapter 3 and 6. The complete quotation, from *De excidio Britanniae* 1.7, runs: “ista ego et multa alia veluti speculum quoddam vitae nostrae in scripturis veteribus intuens, convertabar ad novas, et ibi legebam clarius quae mihi forsitan antea obscura fuerant, cessante umbra ac veritate firmitus inlucescente.” Gildas, *The Ruin of Britain and Other Works*, ed. Winterbottom.

⁴⁴⁴ *Secunda praefatio*, 2-4 (Anderson and Anderson, p. 2).

dispensation.”⁴⁴⁵ Mystically, therefore, Columba, the dove, is equivalent to the Holy Spirit since his name, interpreted biblically, is the reality.

The prestige of the word, and indeed the idea that some speech is privileged over other speech, is largely derivative from the position of the Bible in the intellectual and religious life of the early Irish church. Very often in saints’ *Lives* a saint will turn water into wine, or beer: in Brigit’s version, she appears more aware of where she is than perhaps some other saints are since she turns the water not into wine, but into the true *vin du pays*, beer, running from a fountain (“For He who changed the water into wine at Cana in Galilee also changed water into ale through the faith of this most blessed woman.”)⁴⁴⁶ Muirchú and Tírechán also use the Bible as the ground for the understanding of Patrick’s activity (see Chapter 6 above). The writers force their interpretation on the readers; they condition and guide the readers’ understanding of Patrick’s position in biblical terms.

The writers’ concentration on expression and their lush use of figures of speech indicate the importance of style in this literature, despite the fact that they usually deny that they are in fact writing that way.⁴⁴⁷ Indeed, the word is a constant preoccupation

⁴⁴⁵ “non sine diuina inditum prouidentia.”

⁴⁴⁶ c. 8.2, Connolly and Picard p. 15-16: “Ille enim qui in Cana Galileae aquam conuertit in uinum per huius quoque beatissimae feminae fidem aquam mutauit in ceruisiam.”

⁴⁴⁷ The humility *topos* is very common in early Christian writing. For an example from Hiberno-Latin writing, see the neat praeteritio in the *Uita IV Sanctae Brigidae* (Sharpe, *Medieval Irish Saints’ Lives*, 139: the author asks us specifically not to pay attention to the *positionem uel textum uerborum*, thus calling attention to precisely that. The intention here is to indicate the religious seriousness of the author: as Adomnán puts it (*praef. prima*), the reign of God consists

non in eloquentiae exuberantia
sed in fidei florulentia

thus showing in elaborate words, exactly how important he actually considers style to be. The two phrases share end rhyme, alliteration/assonance, and grammatical equivalency.

throughout early Hiberno-Latin writing.⁴⁴⁸ The power of the word, spoken or written, is a constant theme. In the anonymous *Vita Aedi* there is another example of the power of the spoken word.⁴⁴⁹ We read that the “periti dicunt (the wise declare)” that if one has a headache, one should pray to Aedh by saying his name and he will cure it. Vouching for this is the testimony of St. Brigid, who was cured of headache forever by saying Aedh’s name: “*Invocatio nominis sancti Aedi a gravissimis capitis mei doloribus sanavit me.*”⁴⁵⁰ The significant fact is that speaking the name caused the cure.⁴⁵¹ Very significant, too, is the case of *loricae*—poems in Latin or Irish, rhythmical, repetitive, purporting to be

Adomnán’s earlier call to his readers that they should “*res magis quam verba perpendant*” is disingenuous, or worse. In his arrangement of words, he exactly contradicts the content of the statement.

⁴⁴⁸ The tone is set by the *Confessio* of Patrick, right at the start of Celtic Latin literary history. Patrick is nearly obsessed with the very fact of utterance; indeed, it is the real theme of the *Confessio*. “*Tacere non possum,*” he proclaims (c.3); his speaking is his *restitutio* for God’s grace. Patrick’s protestations of ignorance and rhetorical innocence are, at best, disingenuous. He speaks with an authority and truth greater than that of his critics since the source of what he says is God—quite explicitly so, since he uses the Bible’s own words many times in support of what he writes. In so doing, he takes to himself the authority of the Word of God, which overcomes the rhetorical skills of his enemies. David Howlett treats Patrick’s writings in two places, “*Ex Saliva Scripturae Meae*” in *Sages, Saints and Storytellers. Celtic Studies in Honour of Professor James Carney*. Donnchadh Ó Corráin, Liam Breatnach and Kim McCone, eds. (Maynooth: An Sagart, 1989) 86-101; and *id.*, *Saint Patrick*.

⁴⁴⁹ Heist, *Uita Aedi*, ch. 17, 167-81.

⁴⁵⁰ “The invocation of the name of St Aed healed me of severe headaches” (an early example of celebrity endorsement).

⁴⁵¹ A similar event occurs in a story common to several lives. Some people are about to assault someone else (usually the saint). At the saint’s word, they all freeze and cannot move until the saint again says the word to break the spell (see e.g. Heist *Uita Cainnechi* c. 45, 194; the story is also told of Patrick and Brigid, see *Uita IV*, 1.35; Sharpe *Saints’ Lives*, 150).

spiritual "breastplates" against the weapons of the Devil (his temptations), and against physical ills. The introduction to the "*Lorica Laidcenn*" (on which see further below) in the *Liber Hymnorum* is enlightening as to the power of the spoken word. If someone recites (*cantaverit*) the prayer his enemies, mundane and spiritual, will not harm him, "et mors in illo die non tangit."⁴⁵² An angel vouches for this, by the way; he told Gildas about the prayer's properties. The spoken word, then, has power over the physical world, under the right circumstances.

The writers are as concerned with the authority involved in the act of speech as they are with the content of what is said. Their complex style is a response to the problem inherent in their attitude: how is it possible to speak with authority? and how can we guarantee the validity of what we say? The style of the literature is such that it demands interpretation; the complex rhetoric and allusiveness make it particularly opaque. The interpretive approach was familiar to all the writers from the contemporary treatment of the Bible: Holy Writ was indeed seen as relevant to their times, but it had to be read right, and the proliferation of biblical commentaries and other scholarship at the time suggests that they would not have been able to read it as a plain text. The writers wrote in the same way that they read: they wrote not to be read so much as to be interpreted.

Biblical scholarship was an important part of Irish monastic intellectual life. There are many works of biblical interpretation in Irish sources, many of which are

⁴⁵² "and death does not touch him that day." The title of the poem is properly "*Lorica Laidcenn*." The text is edited in Michael W. Herren, *The Hisperica Famina II: Related Poems* (Toronto: PIMS 1987), 76-89. See J. Borsje, "Celtic Spells and Counterspells," in K. Ritari, & A. Bergholm (eds.), *Understanding Celtic Religion: Revisiting the Pagan Past* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press 2015), 9-50, and David Howlett, "Five Experiments in Textual Reconstruction and Analysis." *Peritia* 9 (1995): 1-50.

contemporary with the seventh-century saints' *Lives* and which may come from the same pens.⁴⁵³ Certainly the biographers of the saints were deeply familiar with biblical scholarship. As with the reading of the Bible itself, or indeed of classical Roman writers like Horace or Vergil, the writers wrote to be interpreted.⁴⁵⁴ Interpretation was familiar to the native Irish in their vernacular intellectual tradition as well. Druids composing in Old Irish, orally or in writing, expected their words would be seen as at least somewhat opaque.⁴⁵⁵ Several levels of reading were familiar and expected. The texts therefore demand that we approach them with several levels in mind.

The elements of style are in fact the elements that validate and give authority to the content of written speech. In the saints' *Lives*, what one might call "special speech" (that is, prophecy, vision, blessing or cursing, or accounts of miracles) provides the content that is most elaborately decorated. In other literary types, the content may be argument (over the date of Easter, maybe); in the hymns, the most elaborate literature by far, the content may be praise or the elaboration of doctrine. In every type of writing, the authors establish the content's validity through stylistic means; the use of verbal cues like alliteration and assonance, chiastic structure and parallelism, rhythm and rhyme. These

⁴⁵³ Laidcenn is the author of the *Egloga de Moralibus Iob* as well as the *Lorica*, on which see below. The edition of the biblical commentary is by M. Adriaen, *Egloga Quam Scripsit Lathcenn filius Baith de Moralibus Iob quas Gregorius Fecit*, CCSL 145 (Turnhout 1969), *BCLL* #293; #294 is the *Lorica*. See also Byrne, "Life of Molua."

⁴⁵⁴ The early medieval Irish schools taught classical authors and wrote commentaries on them. For classical commentaries, see Kenney #113, #535-6, and #542.

⁴⁵⁵ For druidical interpretive strategies, see Myles Dillon and Nora K Chadwick. *The Celtic Realms* (London, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1967), 2, and Mac Cana, *Learned Tales*. It is important to note, though, that evidence for this does not appear in contemporary Irish sources.

rhetorical figures heighten the tone and set off the content as a special form of speech, specially valid. Literary decoration, in making the text richer, increases its value as testimony. By analogy with secular legal terminology, it increases its honor-price and hence the weight given to its testimony in a court.⁴⁵⁶ These verbal interconnections of sound and of grammar were not meaningless accidents of similarity for medieval scholars, after all, but were expressions of the deep connections between the words and the things they signified. The words actually represent their referents; figures of speech describe real relationships.

The necessity for interpretation is a topic for several authors throughout seventh-century literature. Cummin, who for obvious reasons must interpret the Bible correctly in his attempt to resolve the Paschal Dispute, claims that the interpretation of the church and God the Father in terms of the mother and father of a human child must be taken seriously: it is a reality, not just a metaphor.⁴⁵⁷ Moreover, the figure of Christ and the Church as being like Adam and Eve must also be taken seriously.⁴⁵⁸

Interpretation as a literary device appears in Muirchú's *Life of Patrick*, in the scene where Loíguire perceives Patrick and his followers as a stag and his herd of deer (Muirchú I.18.7-8, Bieler 91). Metaphor is made literal here too, and the onlookers interpret the reality.

Patrick, knowing the plots of the evil king, came to the king with his companions, blessed in the name of Jesus Christ (eight men, with a boy); and the king counted them as they were approaching; but suddenly they

⁴⁵⁶See above, Chapter 3 for "honor-price."

⁴⁵⁷ Walsh and Ó Cróinín, 78-81, lines 150-172.

⁴⁵⁸ "Nonne, secundum apostolum, misterium magnum est in Christo et in ecclesia?"

were taken from the king's sight. The pagans saw only eight stags with a fawn, going into the wild.⁴⁵⁹

This event is similar to another event that Tírechán describes, in which the pagans perceive Patrick and his followers as carrying swords “ad occidendos homines; videntur lignei in die apud illos, sed ferreos gladios aestimamus ad effundendum sanguinem.”⁴⁶⁰ The pagans who are interpreting this are in fact right, since the tablets, bringing Christian letters to Ireland, will cause their own decline as druids. The event as reported here bears no relation to appearances, but rather to the reality underlying appearances.

The reports of visions of divine grace, too, require interpretation. It is a common *topos* throughout the saints' *Lives* but most especially in Adomnán, that one or more of the saint's followers see the saint doing something unusual which they do not understand; the saint, whose understanding is superior, then interprets the action for them. Near the end of the *Vita Columbae*, for instance, we have the story of Lugne and Pilu, who see the saint appear to be filled with “incomparabili . . . gaudio,” and immediately then with

⁴⁵⁹ Muirchú I.18.7-8, Bieler 90-91: “Sciens autem Patricius cogitationes regis pessimi benedictis in nomine Iesu Christi sociis suis octo uiris cum puero uenit ad regem ac numerauit eos rex uenientes statimque nusquam comparauerunt ab oculis regis, sed uiderunt gentiles octo tantum ceruos cum hynulo euntes quasi ad dissertum.”

⁴⁶⁰ “(swords) for killing people. In their hands they look wooden by day, but we believe they are swords of iron for shedding blood.” Tírechán, II.3 (Bieler 122-23). See D. Woods, “Tírechán on St. Patrick's Writing Tablets,” *Studia Celtica* 45 (2011), 197-203. Woods, following Bieler (see Bieler's commentary *ad loc.*, 214) understands the passage in Tírechán as a historically accurate report of a genuine meeting between Patrick and druids in Connaught at which the druids either misinterpreted the tablets as swords or disingenuously tried to whip up the people around to fear the Christians. It may be so; the passage also, though, has a meaning not dependent on historical fact. The tablets are *actually* weapons causing the defeat of paganism.

“mestam...tristificationem.”⁴⁶¹ They do not understand this, but Columba sets out to explain it, after a bit. He explains that he first had had a vision of angels coming to bear his soul to heaven; his sorrow followed the realization that he had in fact to endure four more years of life in the flesh before he could join them. The ordinary mortals, monks though they are, cannot have seen this for themselves. The holy man, whose extraordinary sanctity allows him to see the divine plane, must interpret for them the signs that they saw in his face.

The interpretation of mystical events and events of religious import is one of the marks of the saint. One of the last things, significantly, that Columba does in *Adomnán's Life*, is to interpret scripture in terms of his approaching death. His attendant Diormit told him that the community were saddened at the prospect of his death. His reply was:

Haec in sacris uoluminibus dies sabbatum nuncupatur, quod interpretatur requies. Et uere mihi est sabbatum haec hodierna quia huius praesentis laboriosae uitae mihi ultima est in qua post meas laborationum molestias sabatizo. et hac sequenti media uenerabili dominica nocte secundum eloquia scripturarum, patrum gradiar uiam. Iam enim dominus meus Iesus Christus me inuitare dignatur ad quem inquam hac mediante nocte ipso me inuitante emigrabo. sic enim mihi ab ipso domino reuelatum est.⁴⁶²

Columba therefore explicitly made the prediction in terms of the scriptures (secundum eloquia scripturarum) which had to be interpreted, and like scripture, the words of Columba were also a revelation.

⁴⁶¹ *DVC* 3.22. “...incomparable gladness...dull sorrow.”

⁴⁶² “This day is called in the sacred books “Sabbath,” which is interpreted “rest.” And truly this day is for me a Sabbath, because it is my last day of this present laborious life. In it after my toilsome labours I keep Sabbath; and at midnight of this following venerated Lord’s-day, in the language of the Scriptures I shall go the way of the fathers. For now my Lord Jesus Christ deigns to invite me. To him I shall depart, I say, when he invites me, in the middle of this night. For so it has been revealed to me by the Lord himself.” (Adomnán, *DVC* 3.23, Anderson and Anderson 220-21).

The writers in this literary context anticipated that their audience would know what they were up to and wrote accordingly. The texts require a strategy of interpretation—a hermeneutic—sensitive to the techniques of expression and aware of the nature of analogical thought. The act of interpretation itself tends to increase the prestige of the text. In the first place, interpretation implies that the text is special privileged speech and should be taken seriously precisely because it requires interpretation; even more, though, an interpreter of a text is treating it analogously to the Bible.

3: Howlett's Analysis of "Biblical Style"

The only real attempt to describe the style has been that of David Howlett in several books and many articles from the 1990s to today.⁴⁶³ Howlett gives a summary of the stylistic elements.⁴⁶⁴ Briefly stated, what Howlett calls Biblical Style is the repetition of compositional elements in a literary work in a deliberate and conscious way. Howlett

⁴⁶³ See Howlett, *St Patrick the Bishop; Celtic Latin Tradition; Muirchú*; and *British Books in Biblical Style* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1997). These are his major treatments of his theme in book form. He also has written many articles dealing with specific authors and texts. His articles include, on Columban and Cummian, "The earliest Irish writers at home and abroad," *Peritia* 8 (1994), 1-17; on Mo Sinu Maccu Min's note on the computus, Cummian's Paschal Letter, the Lorica of Laidcenn, Cu Chuimne's hymn "Cantemus in omni die" and the hymn "Adelphus adelpha mater," "Five experiments in textual reconstruction and analysis," *Peritia* 9 (1995), 1-50; on the Versus de anni a principio, the Interpretatio Mystica and the canon evangeliorum of Ailerán Sapiens, three verse prayers from the Book of Cerne, Cummianus Longus, Anonymus ad Cuimnannum, Vergilius Maro Grammaticus, the Oratio Gildae and the Lorica of Laidcenn mac Baith, "Seven studies in seventh century texts," *Peritia* 10 (1996) 1-70; "Two works of Saint Columban," *Mittelateinisches Jhrb.* 28 (1994), 27-46; "Insular Latin writers' rhythms," *Peritia* 11 (1997), 53-116.

⁴⁶⁴ In *Celtic Latin Tradition*, 1-54; *British Books in Biblical Style*, 1-100, repeats much of the earlier work verbatim.

describes ten rules of Biblical Style, all of which have as their basis the restatement of the same idea or of similar ideas in a literary work. These ideas may be simply restated in parallel order, reversed in a chiasmus, or restated in a combination of the two; there may be repetition of similar words in the repetitive elements; repetition of words of similar (though perhaps not identical) etymology in parallel passages, similar grammatical constructions, links through alliteration, assonance and rhyme, and other elements. There are also several “adjuncts” to the style: most importantly, arithmetical composition by ratio of the number of words, syllables, or phrases; arithmetical composition based on the placement of words throughout a text; the numerological mystical significance of certain numbers (e.g., 3, 7, 144, 153, etc.); prose rhythm; and the physical layout of a written text on a page, particularly the illumination of certain letters and other decorative features.

Howlett identifies the origins of Celtic Latin style in the works of Pelagius, Patrick, and Gildas. It flourished in the early seventh century in the hands of Columbanus and Cummian. This style seems distinctive to early Celtic writing in Latin. Although, as noted above, the *Vita Martini* is clearly a model for Irish saints’ *Lives*, and indeed for Patrick’s *Confessio*, its style is dependent on classical rhetorical conventions and not on Howlett’s “Biblical Style.”

Howlett’s ideas have proved controversial. Several reviewers found his demonstration of parallelism and ratio in texts to be unconvincing or even trivial. A particularly brutal review applied Howlett’s technique to a sticker attached to a new kitchen appliance, drawing a strained interpretation of what the notice said.⁴⁶⁵ All the

⁴⁶⁵ Helen McKee and James McKee, “Chance or Design? David Howlett’s *Insular Inscriptions* and the Problem of Coincidence,” *CMCS* 51 (2006) 83-101 at 94-95. Howlett’s reply appears in *CMCS* 56 (75-96.) Other reviewers have found Howlett’s

same, the phenomena occur with sufficient regularity to show that they are features of Celtic Latin writing. “Biblical Style” is Celtic.

Howlett’s delineation of the features of insular literature that constitute Biblical Style is beyond serious dispute; his work provides a base line for further research. He does not, however, draw as many conclusions from his own work as one would like, and as seem warranted. The style itself has a meaning in our texts; it creates a mental world in which the saints operate. The features of the style—figures of speech, biblical grounding of the content, rhetorical balance in all its forms, association with traditional native lore—establish the metaphysical truth of what is said and grant credibility to assertions of fact. Thus the accounts of simple miracles or prophecy become factual precisely by virtue of the style in which they are told. The association of saintly action with the divine supramundane world guarantees that the political or ecclesiastical consequences of the saints’ interactions with kings or monks in this world must be part of the divine will.

4: The Style Before the *Lives*

The writers who used the style before the saints’ *Lives* were engaged in polemical writing as part of the Paschal Controversy of the earlier seventh century. The style was originally a weapon used in argument to give greater weight to what the authors were

work to be problematic: see, for instance, Howlett’s response to one negative review: David Howlett, "On John Sharp's Review of Westminster Abbey: The Cosmati Pavements", Nexus Network Journal, vol. 7 no. 2 (Autumn 2005), http://www.nexusjournal.com/reviews_v7n2-Howlett.html, accessed 26 February 2018. For more positive reactions, see my reviews of *The Book of Letters of Saint Patrick the Bishop: Liber Epistularum Sancti Patricii Episcopi* in *Peritia* 10 (1996), 400-407, and of *The Celtic Latin Tradition of Biblical Style* in *Hermathena* 172 (Summer 2002), 57-69.

saying. The Hiberno-Latin authors most closely involved in the Paschal Controversy were Columbanus and Cumman.

Columbanus had originally been a monk of Bangor Co. Down, a monastery that followed the Celtic system. He followed that same system when he founded his continental monasteries and in his *Epistles* promotes it even in the face of papal opposition. His writings use the elements of style that we are examining as part of his argumentation. The impressive start to Columbanus' first *Epistle* is a case in point:

Domino sancto *et* in Christo Patri
Romanae pulcherrimo ecclesiae Decori
totius Europae flaccensis augustissimo quasi cuidam Flori
egregio Speculatori
Theoria utpote diuinae castalitatis perito
ego
Bar Jona (uile Columba) in Christo
mitto salutem.⁴⁶⁶

Patri, *Decori*, *Flori*, and *Speculatori* are clearly all meant to rhyme; they refer to the same person (Pope Gregory) and the rhyme makes them that much more emphatic. Howlett notes that the first two lines display chiasmic alliteration in *-d-*, *-e-*, *-p-*, *-r-*, *-p-*, *-e-*, and *-d-* and that the third line alliterates in an ABAB pattern, in *eu-*, *fl-*, *au-*, *fl-* (as I have indicated above). Emphatic too is the arrangement of the first three phrases in an

⁴⁶⁶“To the Holy Lord and Father in Christ, the most beautiful ornament of the Roman Church, as it were the most revered Flower of all parched Europe, the illustrious bishop, who has mastered the contemplation of divine eloquence, I, Bar-Iona (a lowly dove), send greetings in Christ.” Columbanus *Ep.* 1.1. This passage is one of those that Howlett treats in *Celtic Latin Tradition*, 82-91.

ascending tricolon: three grammatically equivalent phrases increasing in length, so that the lines as arranged are eleven, fourteen, and twenty-one syllables long. Moreover, the end-rhyme of “-o”, throughout the sentence also tends to bind the meaning together. In a later passage (*Ep.* 1.4), Columbanus goes further in his argument: the learned class of the Irish church do not accept Victorian Easter reckoning, and Columbanus writes of them impressively:

Scias namque nostris magistris
et Hibernicis antiquis philosophis
et sapientissimis componendi calculi computariis
Victorium non fuisse receptum...⁴⁶⁷

He makes the authority of the Irish scholars that much more impressive by the cumulation of rhyming “-is” endings. Again we have an ascending tricolon with lines of nine, twelve, and nineteen syllables; note too the alliteration of “componendi calculi computariis.” He states further that the error of Victor has been wrongly accepted in the Roman church, where it was avoided in the East:

haec soporans spina Dagonis
hoc imbibit bubum erroris.⁴⁶⁸

⁴⁶⁷“For you should know that Victorius has not been accepted by our teachers, nor by the ancient Irish savants, nor by those computists most skilled in reckoning of chronology...”

⁴⁶⁸ *Ep.* 1.4. Stanton translates “this sleepy Dagon’s arse drank in this tumour of error.” Robert Stanton, “Columbanus, *Letter* 1: Translation and Commentary,” *Journal of Medieval Latin* 3 (1993), 149-68.

again emphasizing the point with rhyme and making the two phrases which rhyme both have nine syllables. This passage also depends on biblical precedent, explicitly introduced.

Cummian, writing later than Columbanus, wrote his *De Controuersia Paschali* in 432, “(t)he oldest extant Latin text of considerable length by an Irishman in Ireland.”⁴⁶⁹ He is associated with the southern Irish church, perhaps as bishop of Clonfert Brendan, Co. Galway. In 431 he was a participant in the Irish delegation to Rome, sent to investigate the paschal issue; they returned convinced of the Roman position. Cummian wrote his tract in support of Rome and against the position of the *Hibernenses*, the followers of the Celtic Easter.

In the preface to his work Cummian uses features of style that recall the work of Columbanus. While Columbanus addresses Pope Damasus, Cummian addresses Ségéne and Beccán.

Dominis sanctis

et in Christo uenerandis

Segieno abbati

Columbae sancti et caeterorum sanctorum successori

Beccánoque solitario

caro carne et spiritu fratri,

cum suis sapientibus

Cummianus supplex peccator

⁴⁶⁹ Howlett, *Celtic Latin Tradition*, 91. For Cummian see the detailed discussion in Walsh and Ó Cróinín.

magnis minimus

apologeticam in Christo salutem.⁴⁷⁰

In this passage the plural address at the start shows end rhyme (“*sanctis. . . uenerandis*”) in two lines of five and eight syllables. The address to Ségéne specifically is tied together by the alliteration in “-s.” The address to Beccán alliterates in “-c” and its final word “*fratri*,” referring to Beccán, rhymes with the nouns that refer to Ségéne, “*abbati*” and “*successori*.” The scholars associated with both addressees are described in the alliterative “*suis sapientibus*.” Cummian finishes the epistolary address (dative of the addressee, nominative for himself), with the words, also alliterative, “*magnis minimus*,” effectively, he undercuts what he appears to be saying (i.e., that they are great and he of little account, cf. above on the “modesty” topos) by demonstrating in terms of verbal music their real equivalency.

Cummian uses verbal figures as part of his argument as well. In describing the search that he made in the scriptures and other books for the true way to calculate the celebration of Easter, he makes clear the pains that he went through, and the effort he spent. The rhyme and alliteration in this account support his assertions.

Hinc per annum secretus

sanctuarium Dei ingressus

(hoc est scripturam sanctam)

ut ualui

⁴⁷⁰“To the holy and venerable lords in Christ, the Abbot Ségéne, successor of holy Columba and of other holy men, and Beccán the hermit, beloved in body and a brother in spirit, along with their sages...” Walsh and Ó Cróinín, 57. Howlett deals with this text in *Celtic Latin Tradition* 91-102.

inuolui

deinde historias, postremo cyclos quos inuenire potui.⁴⁷¹

The alliterating words *secretus*, *sanctuarium*, and *scripturam sanctam* all are involved in validating Cummin's approach to the scriptures, and in giving authority to the conclusions he arrived at from his study. The effort of his study is further emphasized by the rhyme of the verbs which describe it, "ut ualui, involui," with four syllables each, and the final rhyme with "potui."

In these examples of early seventh-century authors using rhyme (both end rhyme and internal rhyme), anaphora, balance of syllables, and other grammatical and rhetorical figures the writers have constructed a world in which their side in the greatest polemical dispute of the early medieval period in Ireland is stronger than their opponents' and more credible. The power of words that was a reality in the intellectual world of the time had real effects.

The *Lorica of Laidcenn* (see above), a poem of the mid-seventh century, shows the same features of style in a heightened form. It is attributed to Laidcenn mac Baith, who is also the author of the biblical commentary *Egloga de Moraliis Iob* and very likely the author of a seventh-century Latin *Life of Molua*.⁴⁷² His literary activity in these diverse works is an indication of the relationship among diverse genres during this period. As a *lorica*, the poem purports to provide protection to the author and reader

⁴⁷¹ "Hence, having cloistered myself for a year and having entered the sanctuary of God (that is sacred Scripture) I studied as much as I was able, then I examined the histories, and finally the cycles which I could find."

⁴⁷² *BCLL* #294. Byrne, "Life of St Molua" 90-107, suggests the possible authorship of the *Life* by Laidcenn. The poem is edited and analyzed by Howlett, "Five Experiments," 8-18.

against the dangers of sin and disease. The verbal artistry is of a high level. The first six lines are enough to illustrate some of the elements of literary decoration that we have been seeing in the prose. They consist of a couplet (“*Inuocatio*,” in Howlett’s text; it introduces the poem which is otherwise structured as four-lined stanzas) and the first of twenty two quatrains.

The lines run as follows:

Suffragare trinitatis unitas
unitatis miserere trinitas.

Suffragare quaeso mihi posito
magni maris uelut in periculo.

Ut non secum trahat me mortalitas

Huius anni neque mundi uanitas.⁴⁷³

We notice first of all the repetition of “suffragare” at the start of the first couplet and the first quatrain; they constitute a single piece, their unity shown by the repetition. The alliteration of “-m” in the words *miserere*, *mihi*, and *magni maris* indicates some connection between the ideas: he prays for “pity” for “me” in the “great sea of mortality.” The rhyme and the alliteration of “*posito*,” and “*periculo*” is significant: the prayer is for a person placed in danger: the relationship of the words indicates his situation at the

⁴⁷³ “Help me, O unity in Trinity,
Take pity on me, O Trinity in unity.
Help me, I beseech, placed as it were
in the peril of a great sea.
So that neither the plague of this year,
Nor the vanity of this world should take me off.

significant position at the end of the lines. “*Mortalitas*” in line 5 alliterates with “*maris magni*” in 4 and with “*mundi uanitas*” in 6: the great sea that Laidcenn fears is mortality and the vanity of the world, physical and spiritual dangers.

The word order of the first couplet requires some discussion. Each of the two lines consists of three words: an imperative verb (in each case the imperative of a deponent verb), a genitive and a nominative. The grammatical structure of the two lines remains the same while the order of the elements changes. The verb, from the start of line 1, appears in the middle of line 2, while *trinitatis*, in the first line in the middle, becomes *trinitas*, the nominative at the end of the second. Likewise *unitas*, the first line’s nominative at the end, becomes *unitatis*, the genitive at the start of the second. This anaphoric confusion of the word order serves to emphasize the unity of the expression. The rhyming end words—*unitas* and *trinitas*—are identified with each other by the rhyme that indicates the grammatical identity as nominative; as they change places in the genitive, they further describe the doctrine of unity in trinity and trinity in unity. The unity of the trinity, expressed in one line by a phrase of three words, is answered by the trinity of unity in the second line in a phrase of three words. The varying word order, and even the number of words, here give verbal support to the meaning of the prayer.

The elements of style, when interpreted, give validity to the content of what is said. The mode of expression, in demanding interpretation, makes the text self-validating. More often than not, tropaic ways of thinking appear in the texts as figures of speech. The effect of this is to set the expression apart from ordinary, mundane expression, thereby making the speech itself special and specially privileged: the decoration validates what is said. In combination with the realization that figures of speech refer to a reality outside of

themselves we can see that under these circumstances figures of speech themselves turn into figures of thought. Alliteration connecting several words connects the ideas expressed as well and indicates their participation in a higher, supramundane reality. Alliteration becomes trope; style becomes argument.

5. The Power of Prophecy in Adomnán

The view of the literal content of the text as being included in another plane of reality came very naturally to people of the early medieval period. The prevailing Augustinian philosophical and theological understanding of reality saw the mundane world as the image of a truer, unseen, reality, which is superior to and interpenetrates this world. It is the field of the divine: saints in particular are especially close to it. As interpreters of the Bible (as Laidcenn for instance was), the writers were heavily influenced by the earlier Alexandrian school which developed the four-fold sense of scripture and encouraged readers to find occult allegorical and figurative meanings in the words of the scriptures.⁴⁷⁴

In literary terms, the unseen reality forms a plane of existence to which the world of appearances (consisting, in a literary context, of linguistic phenomena) relates, both in broad themes and in small particulars. That is, the minuscule items of style and writing, the figures of speech as minute as alliteration and assonance of individual letters, relate to the world of transcendent reality; they express something of that divine plane.

The effect of alliteration or assonance is to establish a connection between two ideas that may not be present in grammatical terms. For instance, readers of the

⁴⁷⁴ See Smalley, *The Bible*, Chapter I, "The Fathers," 1-36.

alliterative phrase, common in all authors, “*deo donante*,” would not have understood the association of the two words as a purely accidental correspondence: God and the giving (of whatever is in question) are most intimately connected. The association of ideas is also demonstrated by end-rhyme. These verbal associations can and often do appear together. As a concrete example, Adomnán (1.12), describes a prophecy as the *uenerabilis uiri uaticinium*. It is no accident that these words introduce the saint’s prophecy, since their very sound guarantees it.

Prophecy is a very specific and especially powerful form of speech. Prophecies in these *Lives* generally appear in *oratio recta*, and thus purport to represent the actual words spoken by a saint whose closeness to the divine realm makes his or her words especially powerful. The direct quotation of the saint’s own words in *oratio recta* is a particularly powerful locus of verbal power. Of course we can certainly say that the *oratio recta* speech of the saints cannot be actual reporting. Any directly quoted speech by a saint is necessarily a literary construction. The heightened style and decorated words are a deliberate choice on the part of the author.

In Adomnán *de Vita Columbae*, 1.17, the special speech of prophecy is set apart by the style: Columba *profetice profatur*, words that introduce rhythmical prophecies. Colcu, a monk of Iona and a member of a noble family,⁴⁷⁵ claims that his mother is of a good character, but Columba says,

mox Deo uolente
ad Scotiam profectus
matrem diligentius

⁴⁷⁵ Perhaps the Uí Fiachrach of Co. Galway: see Anderson and Anderson, 41, fn. 47.

de quodam suo
pergrandi peccato
interroga occulto

quod nulli hominum confiteri uult.⁴⁷⁶

The lines ending in “-us” are seven syllables long and show end-rhyme. The lines ending “-o” form an ascending tricolon, increasing by a syllable each. The words that rhyme are grammatically connected, and “*pergrandi peccato*” alliterates in “*p-*.” When Colcu returns to Columba after determining that his mother was in fact guilty of the sin, Columba makes another prophecy concerning Colcu’s death. After many years as the head of a monastery,

. . . si forte aliquando
tuum uideris pincernam
in cena amicorum ludentem
auritoriumque in giro per collum torquentem
scito te mox in brevi moriturum.⁴⁷⁷

The three phrases referring to the butler (*pincernam*) increase in length from eight syllables (*tuum uideris pincernam*) to ten (in *cena amicorum ludentem*) to fourteen (*auritoriumque in giro per collum torquentem*). Each word directly referring to the man (*pincernam*, *ludentem*, *torquentem*) is a trisyllable. The words referring to the butler define the three lines describing the conditions under which Colcu’s death will occur.

⁴⁷⁶ “Soon, God willing, when you have gone to Ireland ask your mother very carefully about some great sin of hers that is hidden, which she wishes to confess to no person.”

⁴⁷⁷ “If perhaps at some time you see a butler, enjoying himself at a dinner with his friends, swinging a pitcher around by its neck, know that you will die soon.”

A bit later, in the same *Life* (1.19), Columba tells Baithéne of a great whale, but tells him also not to fear:

Uade . . . in pace. Fides tua in Christo
te ab hoc defendet periculo.⁴⁷⁸

The lines rhyme in “-o.” “*Christo*” and “*te*” are ranged next to one another in the middle of the prophecy, while *fides* and *periculo* frame the expression.

In Adomnán 2.26, the saint by his mere words kills a boar (alliteratively called “*mirae magnitudinis aprum*”) which was being chased by dogs. Columba was alone and simply said to it, continuing the alliteration, “*morire*.” Adomnán’s account continues, “*quo sancti in siluis personante uerbo*” the boar fell: “*terribilis ferus uerbi eius uirtute mortificatus cito conruit*.”⁴⁷⁹ This anecdote achieves its supernatural significance by illustrating the power of Columba’s word with alliteration in “s,” in “u,” and in “c.”

Columba, close to his death, made powerless the poison of the snakes of Iona, as long as the inhabitants remained faithful to Christ’s commands (Adomnán 2.28). His command is marked with alliteration and syllabic balance:

Ex hoc huius horulae momento
omnium uiperarum uenena
nullo modo, in huius insulae terrulis,
aut hominibus aut pecoribus
nocere poterunt,

⁴⁷⁸ “Go in peace. Your faith in Christ will defend you from this danger.”

⁴⁷⁹ “While the word of the saint was echoing in the forest. . . the terrible wild animal fell immediately, killed by the power of his word.”

quamdiu Christi mandata eiusdem commorationis incolae obseruauerint.⁴⁸⁰

The phrase describing the significant time (“*hoc huius horulae*”) alliterates in “*h*”.

“*uiperarum uenena*” alliterates in consonantal “*u*”.

Columba again predicts the fate of two children (I.16). One father asks about his son and Columba replies

Nonne sabbati dies hodierna est?

filius tuus sexta feria,

in fine morietur septimanae,

octauaque die, hoc est, sabbato, hic

sepelietur.⁴⁸¹

The lines are balanced in syllabic count (11, 10, 11 11). It is also significant that the prediction is structured so that the periods of time increase in number: “*sexta feria, septimanae, octaua . . . die.*” The lines alliterate in “*s*” and are balanced in syllabic count as noted. Immediately following, the second father asks about his son, and Columba replies

Filius tuus Ernanus

suos uidebit nepotes

et in hac insula senex

sepelietur.⁴⁸²

⁴⁸⁰ “From this moment of this hour, the poison of all snakes will in no way be able to harm either people or animals on the land of this island; as long as the inhabitants of the same monastery observe the commands of Christ.”

⁴⁸¹ “Is this not the sabbath day? Your son will die at the end of the week on the sixth day (i.e. Friday) and on the eighth day, that is the sabbath, he will be buried here.”

Again the words alliterate in “s,” and the sense units of the text are syllabically balanced with eight syllables each.

When Columba tells his followers to cast their net once more into the River Sale (Adomnán 2.19), he is clearly echoing the actions of Jesus in *Jn.* 21:6 or *Lc.* 5:4. The miracle acquires force from its reference to the action of the Savior, but the words Columba uses are also significant.

iterato (ait) rete in flumen mittite,
et statim inuenietis grandem,
quem mihi Dominus praeparauit, piscem.⁴⁸³

The words fall in to three phrases of 12, 10, and 12 syllables, excluding ait. The significant word, “*inuenietis*,” comes in the exact center of the quotation, and describes the miraculous action. The final words alliterate in “p.”

Columba also has an encounter with an angel. In III.4, Adomnán records the visit of Columba as a youth to Finnio, his master.⁴⁸⁴ Finnio sees an angel accompanying Columba and says to some monks who are witnesses (“*astantibus . . . fratribus*”) the following.

Ecce nunc uideatis
Sanctum aduenientem Columbam,
Qui sui commeatus

⁴⁸² “Your son Ernanus will see his grandsons, and he will be buried on this island as an old man.”

⁴⁸³ “He said, ‘Send your net into the river again and immediately you will find a great fish which the Lord has prepared for me.’”

⁴⁸⁴ Finnian of Clonard, or of Moville. See Anderson and Anderson, xxix.

meruit habere

socium angelum caelicolum.⁴⁸⁵

The self-contained phrases referring to Columba and his angelic companion are balanced. Each consists of three words, all in the accusative, and they associate the saint and his angel. Each phrase alliterates with the other, “*sanctum*” with “*socium*” in “-s” and internal rhyme in “-c-”, “*aduenientem*” with “*angelum*” in “-a,” and “*Columbam*” with “*caelicolum*” in “-c” with internal rhyme in “-l-.” Each phrase referring directly to the saint or the angel consists of ten syllables. It is also notable that the phrases “*ecce nunc uideatis*” and “*qui sui commeatus*” are balanced in syllable count at seven each.

A similar example of word usage in a context of special speech occurs in Adomnán 2.25. An evil man has just murdered a girl in the saint’s presence. The saint reacts by speaking words partly prophecy, partly curse:

Eadem hora qua

interfectae ab eo filiae anima

ascendit ad caelos

anima ipsius interfectoris

descendit ad inferos.⁴⁸⁶

The nature of the speech’s contents make it special; the style of the wording validates it.

The two verb phrases are exactly equivalent, forming an isocolon. The nominative “*anima*” in each of the clauses forms a chiasmus: at the end of one line and the beginning

⁴⁸⁵ “Look now and see Saint Columba approaching, who has deserved to have a heavenly angel as the companion of his journey.”

⁴⁸⁶ “In the same hour in which the soul of the girl whom he has slain ascends to heaven, the soul of her slayer descends to hell.”

of the other, in each case forming a chiasmus with the genitive (“*interfectae...filiae*,” and “*interfactoris*”). “*Interfectae...filiae*,” forming an adjective/noun pair, surround “*ab eo*” in the first phrase; in the second, the words “*anima...interfactoris*,” referring to the killer—“*ab eo*,” above—surround “*ipsius*,” referring to the “*interfectae filiae*.” Stylistically the prophecy is made a unified whole; the grammatically and stylistically parallel form of words takes the expression out of the ordinary and directs us to read it as something set apart. Adomnán goes further and explicitly provides an interpretation based on biblical precedent: the immediate death of the cursed man in front of Columba was “*sicut Ananias coram Petro*,” referring to *Acts* 5:1-5. Adomnán directs his readers to see Columba’s action as equivalent to Peter’s, and to see Columba himself as the equivalent of Peter.

6. Similar Expressions in Other Texts

Adomnán’s *De Uita Columbae* is an especially rich source of examples of verbal decoration in this style, but other texts of the seventh century also display the same features. The prologue to the *Vita IV Sanctae Brigidae* (Sharpe), asserts the divine impulse that led the author to write.⁴⁸⁷ The divine source is emphasized in the alliteration: “*Amor*, (i.e., Divine Love) *me cogit commendare*,” to write “*in chartis*” Brigit’s “*charismata*.” The prologue is richly alliterative throughout.

The stylistic pattern is followed, even in small ways. In the *Additamenta* in the *Book of Armagh*, in the context of a short account of the foundation of the monastery at

⁴⁸⁷ Edition by Sharpe, *Saints’ Lives*, Ch. 5, “A Paradigm of the Dublin Collection: *Vita IV S. Brigidae*,” 120-215.

Trim, there is a mini-*Life* of Lomman, the British Christian who accompanied Patrick back to Ireland on his mission. While he was guarding the ship in which they had travelled, he converted Fedelmí, Loíguire's son, at Trim. When they met, Lomman introduced himself with two rhyming phrases of six syllables each:

Ego sum Lommanus

Britto Christianus.⁴⁸⁸

Likewise, in the long chapter in Adomnán relating Columba's death (III.23, p.220-21) we read also about the farm horse carrying "*lactaria bocetum inter et monasterium uascula*." Here we see a chiasmic arrangement of the words: "*lactaria*" and "*uascula*," grammatically connected, frame the expression, while "*inter*" appears between the words denoting the places between which the horse would carry the milk vessels: "*bocetum*" and "*monasterium*."

Rhythmical prose is found most often in the predictions made by the various saints, perhaps originally as an *aide-memoire* but its literary function is to highlight the words as special speech derived from the realm of the divine. We have seen a few examples above dealing with Adomnán; there are many other examples. For instance, we have the prediction of Columba dealing with the death of Guaire mac Aidain.⁴⁸⁹ The text of the prophecy is set out in stressed iambic verse, thus:

nec in bello

nec in mari morieris

⁴⁸⁸"I am Lomman, a Christian Briton." Bieler *Patrician Texts* 168-69. The short text may be eighth-century: *ibid.* 47.

⁴⁸⁹Adomnán, *DVC* 1.47, on which see J.-M. Picard, "The strange death of Guaire mac Aidain," in Ó Corráin et al., eds. *Sages, Saints and Storytellers*, 367-75.

Comes tui itineris
A quo non suspicaris
causa erit tui mortis.⁴⁹⁰

The syllables of the last four lines are also equivalent (8,8,7,8; the fourth line has a catalectic foot, i.e., it lacks a syllable usually present). The first line of this is an introduction; it is half the length of the others with four syllables. The four full lines all rhyme at the end. Note also the alliteration of the “m” of *mari*, *morieis*, and *mortis*. This anecdote has further features for us to notice beyond the alliteration and rhythm. The story is clearly derived from the native tradition of storytelling, as an example in Latin of the Irish genre of Death Tale (*aided*).⁴⁹¹ Picard points out several parallels with Old Irish literature, particularly in the tales of CúChullain.⁴⁹² Hence, the tale acquires resonance not only from the miraculous character of the prediction but from its literary association with native learning.

In another place, Adomnán again uses verse for prophecy (II.36).

potens est dominus...domum suum seruis
etiam sine clauibus aperire suis.⁴⁹³

⁴⁹⁰ “You will die neither in battle nor in the sea. A companion of your journey, from whom you suspect nothing, will be the cause of your death.” Picard *art. cit.* notes the “rhyming heptasyllabic verses reminiscent of *rosc* poetry,” 372.

⁴⁹¹ See Picard, *art. cit.*, Anderson and Anderson *ad loc*, and Mac Cana, *The learned tales of medieval Ireland*.

⁴⁹² Picard, *art. cit.*, 370.

⁴⁹³ “The Lord has power to open his house for his servants, even without keys.”

The prediction, dealing with the opening of a church door when the keys were lost, is in stressed Saturnians⁴⁹⁴. The rhythm is supported here as well by the alliteration in “-s”.

Brigit’s *Life* by Cogitosus shows similar features.⁴⁹⁵ In the *praefatio*, he says that he will be telling of the saint: “*quanta qualisque uirgo uirtutum florida*,” alliterating in “*q*” and “*u*” and describing her saintly qualities. In demonstration of the qualities, he instances many people coming willingly to her monastery, performing vows “*uota sibi uouentes uoluntarie*,” the monastery in Kildare she “*in campestribus campi Liffey supra fundamentum fidei firmiter construxit*,” again alliterating in “*c*” and in “*f*.” Moreover, her saintly leadership makes the church a greater foundation. She herself appointed a priest (i.e., a bishop, Conleth) to maintain the sacramental life of Kildare: Cogitosus describes him as “*summo sacerdote*.” The *praefatio* as a whole is carefully constructed, with phrases and clauses balancing parallel phrases and clauses throughout the passage.⁴⁹⁶ The *subscriptio* at the end of the work is also carefully constructed.

Cogitosus uses such features of style in other places than the *praefatio* and *subscriptio*. In c. 2, Brigit gives some butter to a beggar and has more left over, in a reference to the miracle of the loaves and fishes. She acts “*mirum in modum*,” alliterating in “*m*” and her prayer is heard by God, “*uocem uirginis audiens*.” In c. 24, Cogitosus

⁴⁹⁴ The Saturnian meter is a very early and Latin verse form that persisted in use outside of the classical poetic tradition derived from Greek. Unlike the Greek forms it is based on stress rather than syllable length. Further, Murphy *Early Irish Metrics* 8-11.

⁴⁹⁵ The following examples all derive from the *Praefatio*, PL 777-78, Connolly and Picard cc. 3-5. Howlett treats the *Praefatio* in *Celtic Latin Tradition*, 243-49.

⁴⁹⁶ Howlett concludes, “The long and involved sentences belie the protestations of humble diffidence by an author who exhibits clearly a sense of self-possessed competence.” (*Celtic Latin Style*, 248).

describes Lugid as “*ualidus uir ualde, et uirorum fortissimus.*” One other time, she was riding to an assembly of the people in a chariot, reminiscent of other heroic chariots (see above Chapter 4: chariots are a distinguishing mark of Irish heroic culture). While she was praying one of the two horses got out of the yoke and ran away, but she continued to pray and God kept the yoke upright and the chariot stayed the course until she arrived at the assembly. When she got there, she spoke to the assembly, and Cogitosus elevates her speech, notably not in *oratio recta* (a sign, I suspect, of Cogitosus writing in a gendered way), with rhythmical and alliterative prose. She spoke

. . . sic signis et uirtutibus
suam confirmans doctrinam
sermonibus salutaribus
et sale diuino conditis. . .⁴⁹⁷

Each phrase is complete grammatically and refers to the content of her speech. Each phrase consists of eight syllables; throughout the short passage, there is alliteration in “s;” the grammatical connection of the ablatives also creates a rhyme scheme in the two endings “-ibus” and “-is.”

Cogitosus seems less caught up in the style than is Adomnán or Muirchú. The reason is actually not hard to find. Cogitosus does not report the direct speech of the saint anywhere near as much as the other writers do. Conceivably Brigit’s apparent reticence results from her sex; in any case, Columba’s prophecies are the most significantly marked speech in Adomnán’s *Life*. Brigit speaks little.

⁴⁹⁷ “Thus strengthening her teaching with signs and miracles, with speech leading to salvation and spiced with divine salt. . .”

7. The Past From the Words

The seventh-century writers in Ireland use a distinctive style: so much is clear. The saints' *Lives* use the style to create the world of early Christian Ireland in which the saints operate; that is, from the perspective of the seventh century, they create the Irish past. Several examples of the way in which the authors construct the past follow.

Figures of speech appear within prophecy throughout the saints' *Lives*. It does not seem to matter to the writers whether the prophecy is spoken by the saint or his opponents, though. In Muirchú's account of the pagan druids' prediction of Patrick's arrival in I.10.4, not only do we see reference to an actual *rosc* (see above, chapter 3), but their own account of the *doctrina molesta* which was coming from across the sea is highly figured. I reproduce the stichic arrangement of the *Book of Armagh*, 2^{va}:⁴⁹⁸

trans maria aduectum,	
a paucis dictatum, a multis sus	
ceptum,	
ab omnibus(que)	honorandum,
regna	subuersurum,
resistentes (reges occissurum) turbas seducturum,	
omnes eorum deos	distructurum,
et iectis omnibus illorum artis operibus in sae	

⁴⁹⁸The MS of the *Book of Armagh* is now available for electronic viewing as part of the confessio.ie site: part of the *St Patrick's Confessio Hypertext Stack*, ed. Anthony Harvey and Franz Fischer (www.confessio.ie, on line since 2011), at <http://www.confessio.ie/manuscripts/dublincodex>.

cula regnatum⁴⁹⁹

This prediction is no less forceful for being spoken by a non-Christian (or pre-Christian) druid: its reference to the arrival *of* Patrick gives it the same sort of power that a prediction *by* Patrick would have. Bieler notes this section as an example of “poetic” style in Muirchú.⁵⁰⁰ The words are assembled to show their power. That the rhyming words are grammatically connected is a feature of Latin grammar, of course, and creates the connections between the ideas in a formal grammatical sense, but the rhyme is also at work in demonstrating the connections between ideas. The things that the new kingdom of Christianity will do *sound* like each other, and so actually *are* like each other.

Many of Columba’s miracles in Adomnán are similar to this druidical prediction in Muirchú in situating the supramundane vision of the saint in the public and secular world of contemporary seventh-century Ireland. One instance, which concerns two kings in Ireland who were fighting at that very moment, is in rhythmical prose, which ought to be arranged thus:

O filioli,

quare inaniter de his sic confabulamini?

Nam illi ambo reges de quibus nunc sermocinamini

⁴⁹⁹ “Having come across the sea commanded by few received by many, and honored by all, he will overturn kingdoms, kill resisting kings, lead the crowds astray, destroy all their gods, and reign forever after tossing out all the works of their art.”

⁵⁰⁰ Bieler, *Patrician Texts* 17. He describes the passage as “. . . Late Latin rhetorical (and in part, rhyming) prose and need not reflect any poetical source, whether Latin or Irish.” The point I am making is not primarily that the source is poetical, although that is likely, but that the arrangement of the Latin words by Muirchú is poetical.

nuper ab inimicis decapitati dispereunt.⁵⁰¹

In the first place, the fact that this is a prophecy (or, more strictly, a vision) establishes it as special speech: the fact that the saint is vouchsafed visions at all is itself an indication of his holiness, and of his intimate relationship with supramundane reality. The expression of the account of the vision, though, further validates the content of his speech. The prophecy falls naturally into these three lines. The first two lines show end rhyme;⁵⁰² the last shows alliteration in “d,” which serves to bind the notion of the kings’ death and the manner of it together. Thus the end rhymes bind the first two lines together.

The context of the story (another “*uenerabilis uiri uaticinium*,” marked with alliteration) is the battle fought by the two grandsons of Muiredach, Baitán and Echoid. Their deaths are recorded in the *Annals of Ulster*.⁵⁰³ Adomnán associates them with Columba’s divine knowledge, and so the account of the battle is part of the Irish past he is creating.

Another prophecy deals with Columba’s ecclesiastical trial at Teiltiu (=Teltown, Co. Meath) on some unknown charge. The testimony of Brénden of Birr effected the dismissal of this charge. Adomnán directly quotes Brénden’s words that serve to guarantee Columba’s virtue: Brénden, a saint himself and so in touch with the world of

⁵⁰¹ I.12, Anderson and Anderson 36-37: “My children, why do you thus idly converse about these men, seeing that both the kings of whom you are now talking have recently perished, beheaded by their enemies?”

⁵⁰² Of course, this is a result of Latin’s inflections; this author was using that linguistic feature for literary effect.

⁵⁰³ *AU*, s.a. 572: “Occisio da oea Muiredaigh, .i. Boet án mc. Muirchertaigh & Echaid mc. Domnaill. . . tertio anno regni sui. Cronán mc Tigernaigh . . . occisor eorum erat.” “The slaying of two descendants of Muiredach, i.e. of Baetán son of Muirchertach and Echaid son of Domnall...in the third year of their reign. Crónán son of Tigernach..was their slayer (tr. Mac Airt and Mac Niocaill, 87).”

eternal truth, can see through the incidental mundane accusations to Columba's real character. Adomnán concludes the account with "*hic famen factum est hi Teilte*."⁵⁰⁴ The alliteration of the hisperic word "*famen*" with "*factum est*" gives power to the statement by a saint.

In 3.3, Adomnán tells of Brénden of Birr's speaking in support of Columba after the synod had excommunicated him. Brénden rises before Columba, bows to him, and then kisses his face.⁵⁰⁵ This scandalizes the other churchmen. Brénden replies to his critics with this:

Si uos uideretis ea quae mihi dominus hac in die hoc suo quem dehonoris electo manifestare non dedignatus est, numquam excommunicassetis quem deus non solum secundum uestram non rectam sententiam nullo excommunicat modo, sed etiam magis et magis glorificat.⁵⁰⁶

The context is redolent of political concerns. In this passage, Brénden supports Columba with a vision of reality that was his alone, and specifically calls the judgment against

⁵⁰⁴ "This saying was made at Teltown." Adomnán *DVC* 3.3, Anderson and Anderson 186-87. The use of the "hisperic" vocabulary, "*famen*," further heightens the authority of the story.

⁵⁰⁵ These actions are typical in Irish society of respect for one higher in status. Brendan himself was of noble stock and at this time he was also a monastic leader, both of which circumstances imply high status. His willingness to submit to Columba's presence speaks of Columba's higher status. A parallel occurs in Muirchú, 1.17 and is repeated in *Tírechán* 13. Ercc was the only man in Loguire's palace to rise before Patrick, and he was rewarded, with his relics receiving honor in Slane. See the discussion of *airerge*, "rising," in Irish law, D.A. Binchy, ed. *Críth gablach* (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1970), and Kelly, *Early Irish Law*, 32.

⁵⁰⁶ "If you were to have seen the things which the Lord has deigned to show me on this day about his chosen one whom you dishonor, you would never have excommunicated him, whom God has not only *not* excommunicated according to your faulty judgement, but even glorifies more and more."

Columba "*uestram non recte sententiam.*" Brénden, as a saint, can see what others cannot. Brénden continues,

ignicomam et ualde luminosam columnam uidi
eundem quem uos dispicitis antecedentem dei hominem
angelos quoque sanctos per campum eius iteris [sic] comites.
Hunc itaque spernere non audeo
quem populorum ducem ad uitam a deo
praeordinatum uideo.⁵⁰⁷

The words are very convoluted and formal, and they require careful reading. The passage includes end rhyme of several words, intertwined and connected grammatically:

"*ignicomam, luminosam, columnam.*" They are all connected to the man of God, "*eundem, antecedentem, hominem.*" Lastly, the end of the passage shows rhyme in "-eo": "*audeo, a deo, uideo.*" The passage as a whole is a defense of Columba against the accusations which caused his excommunication.⁵⁰⁸ Clearly Brénden's intervention turned the political tide away from Columba's opponents; the verbal expression added authority to his words.

⁵⁰⁷ "I have seen a fiery and very luminous column proceeding before the same man of God whom you despise, and holy angels also as companions of his journey through the plain. I therefore do not dare to spurn him whom I see as preordained by God to be the one leading the peoples to life."

⁵⁰⁸ The exact charge is not known. See Sharpe Adomnán 13. It may be connected to the Battle of Cúl Dreimne, and/or the Easter Controversy. In either case, the story supports Columba and turns the events into another glorification of him rather than a criticism implicit in an excommunication.

Muirchú's *Life* describes a post mortem miracle involving Patrick's relics.⁵⁰⁹ In this story hyperbaton is combined with alliteration. Patrick's relics were a *casus belli* between the Uí Néill and Airthir (in Muirchú's Latin, "*Orientales*"), and the Ulaid. Patrick's power came between them and raised a flood to prevent their battle. Muirchú says

surrexit freti feritas et

plebes pugnare prohibuit.⁵¹⁰

The miraculous flood (*freti feritas*) alliterates in "*f*;" the resulting avoidance of battle alliterates in "*p*." The phrases appear chiastically, with the verb first in the first phrase, and last in the second. Grammar and sound link the two phrases, and the words establish the supernatural origin of the flood that prevented the battle. The succeeding chapter supports this interpretation. When the armies tried to resume the fight later the Uí Néill and their allies tried to take possession of Patrick's body, "*sed felici seducti sunt fallacia*:" they thought that they had Patrick's body in a cart, but it vanished while they were trying to get it away. Again the phrase describing the saintly intervention is alliterative and chiastically arranged: the "*felici fallacia*" alliterates in "*-f*," while separated in hyperbaton by the verb phrase "*seducti sunt*," itself alliterating in "*-s*."

In I.38 Adomnán tells the story of a rich cleric (*clericus*), Luguid the Lamé. He is described as "*currui insedentem*," riding across the Plain of Brege "*gaudenter*." When

⁵⁰⁹2.14, Bieler 121-23. This passage is not noted in Patrick Geary's *Furta Sacra: Thefts of Relics in the Central Middle Ages* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978). It is clearly a part of the same relic stealing of which he treats. See Niamh Wycherley, *The Cult of Relics in Early Medieval Ireland* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2015). For the political background, Ó Cróinín, *NHI* 232.

⁵¹⁰ "The fury of the sea arose and prevented the peoples from fighting."

Columba asks who he is, his friends said “*Hic est Lugudius Clodus, homo diues et honoratus in plebe.*” The saint then made a prediction: the man will be a “*homuncio miser et pauper*” when he dies. He will have three stray cattle belonging to his neighbors in his possession and ask for one of them to be slaughtered for him. Then, he will ask for it to be served,

De cuius cocta carne...

Aliquam sibi partem dari

cum meritrice in eodem lectulo cubanti.⁵¹¹

He will then eat a piece of the meat and it will choke him and he will die.

The language is decorated with alliteration in “-c-” (“*cuius cocta carne*,” representing the instrument of Luguid’s death and so a part of Columba’s miraculous prediction). The prediction is very circumstantial and clearly connected to Irish folk tales. The death of Luguid appears in the *Uita Columbae* as an example of his prophetic gifts: this rich cleric is not described in a particularly negative way, but Columba sees him in a more negative way.

His clerical status does not initially seem to be an important point in the story.⁵¹² There may be more of a context in which the clerical status was of more importance. Luguid was of high status, both secular and clerical, apparently, in the central part of the lands of the Southern Uí Néill. Columba seems to be visiting Ireland from Iona, so after

⁵¹¹ “. . . a cooked part of the meat (of the steer) to be given to him as he sits in the same couch as a prostitute.”

⁵¹² So Sharpe, *Adomnán*, 300: “. . . the point is probably that clerical orders were merely an adjunct to a man of high secular status.”

his “exile” in 563. His opposition to this man, Luguid, should be seen in the context of Irish politics, secular and ecclesiastical. The Uí Néill of Brega were opponents of Columba’s community in two ways: as representatives of the Southern Uí Néill in the wake of the Battle of Cúl Dreimne against the Northern Uí Néill, Columba’s people, and as representatives of the church of Armagh, the champions of the Roman Easter as against Columba’s continued championing of the Celtic Easter.

The four authors of saints’ *Lives* from seventh-century Ireland write a world. In their works they construct the world of the saints by giving words power, and then use the power to show that the saints are the supernatural engineers of the ecclesiastical and political structures of their own times, and thus of the seventh century world.

CHAPTER 8

CONCLUSIONS

This dissertation began as a way to answer questions I had about some features of early medieval Irish saints' *Lives*. The *Lives* are written in a style I had not encountered before: they are highly decorated, rhythmical, alliterative, metaphorical, and semiotic. The text of Adomnán is particularly rich in verbal decoration, but the same features appear in the other writers as well (and in the anonymous *Lives*). My pursuit has been long, but fruitful.

The style is identifiable as characteristic of writing in Latin in early Ireland. Parts of the style are common to Late Latin and the Latin of the early Middle Ages, but taken as a whole the way that the Irish writers use it is distinctive. Although based on Late Latin "jeweled style," the rhetorical features of rhyme and rhythm, and of alliteration and syllabic balance, are derived from Old Irish literary conventions. Several passages, especially from Adomnán and Muirchú, are indistinguishable from Irish verse (although in a different language). Much of the material falls into Howlett's "Biblical Style" but his analysis does not address the fullness of the verbal decoration.

The writers of the *Lives* generally employ the style when they are recounting miracles, especially miracles of prophecy when the saint speaks aloud with power. Decorated speech and miraculous power go together, not coincidentally. The miracle is evidence of the saint's participation in the world of divine reality. Saints can see things that other people cannot; can see the relationships between this world and supramundane reality. They can therefore alter this world's reality by bringing the reality of heaven into

relationship with it. The literary style is the way that the saints make heaven come to earth: the associations between words highlight the saints' divine knowledge.

The *Lives* glorify the saintly subjects for a reason: the writers aim to promote the interests of their own communities by showing that their founders were exceptionally holy and powerful saints. More specifically, they showed the way that their saints, in the relatively distant past, established the political and ecclesiastical order that obtained in the seventh century, the time of writing. Since the *Lives* are set in the past, they construct the world from which the powerful institutions of contemporary Ireland emerged, with saintly ratification. The different church centers (Armagh, Kildare, and the Columban *paruchia*) were rivals for power; the literary means of conflict was the saint's *Life*. Late as the Irish were to adopt this form, they chose it for its traditional association with polemics. Ancient and early Christian biography typically asks its readers to favor one side in intellectual or religious conflict. In seventh-century Ireland, saintly biography was a natural way for monasteries to compete.

The saints' *Lives* are a major part of the seventh-century construction of the Irish past. Muirchú's account of Patrick's mission establishes the narrative of early Irish history. He portrays Patrick as the indisputable and sole evangelizer of the whole country, whose coming was anticipated and whose success was assured. He further portrays the family of his adversary in Muirchú's story, Loíguire, as losing their kingly status as a result of Patrick's actions. The narrative of the events of the fifth century guarantees the conditions of the seventh when a different branch of the Uí Néill reigned at Tara. Muirchú's writing, including "Biblical Style," native folklore elements, and Old Irish literary forms like *rosc*, helps the reader to assent to the picture Muirchú presents.

Tírechán's work is overtly propagandistic, openly asserting that Patrick was the founder of nearly all the churches of Ireland. His evangelization in the fifth century is the basis for ecclesiastical power in the seventh century.

The construction of the past is also the construction of geography. Cogitosus is concerned to establish the primacy of the church of Kildare and the foundation of Brigit herself.⁵¹³ He describes her as having the authority of a bishop, a phrase sometimes misread as a hint of gender equality in the Celtic church. It is not, but rather aims to promote the authority of Kildare. Cogitosus' account of the church building also feeds into this idea. The account establishes Kildare as a rival to Armagh.

Adomnán deals with the historical past of sixth-century Ireland and Scotland across several chapters. Columba's position as a leading member of the Northern Uí Néill made him central to many of the political disputes of the time, both ecclesiastical and secular (if they can be distinguished). Several of the accounts of Columba's miracles deal explicitly or by implication with the assembly at Drum Cett, when the political and ecclesiastical leaders made decisions regarding the position of the Airgialla. This dynasty was subordinate to the Uí Néill in Ireland but was the ruling dynasty of Gaelic Scotland, where they were outside of the authority of the Uí Néill.⁵¹⁴ Columba's position as a member of the Uí Néill nobility and at the same time as leader of the religious center of the Airgialla kingdom was central. The miracles make it clear that he was important and that the decision at the meeting was the right one.

⁵¹³ See Charles-Edwards, *ECI*, Chapter 10, "The Primatial Claims of Armagh, Kildare and Canterbury," 416-40.

⁵¹⁴ Adomnán, *DVC* 1.10 and 11; 1.49 and 50; 2.6; Anderson and Anderson 33-35; 89-90; 103-05.

Adomnán tells quite a few stories about Columba's relations with King Bridei, a king among the Picts. Columba was the one who converted the Picts to Christianity and his actions there appear in Adomnán's work to support the narrative of the conversion.⁵¹⁵ The account in the *Life of Columba* creates the past of Pictland. Adomnán also has several chapters dealing with Diarmait mac Cerbaill and his sons, leading figures in the sixth-century northern Irish political milieu.⁵¹⁶

The way the authors of the saints' *Lives* write makes their view of the world of early medieval Ireland and Scotland uniquely credible. When Muirchú writes of Patrick establishing Christianity and putting the Irish kingdoms in order, when Cogitosus asserts the primacy of Kildare, when Adomnán fleshes out the tales of Columba's power in the Uí Néill and Airgialla politics, it is the power of the words that guarantees the readers that the *Lives* are describing the world as it genuinely is. The *Lives* in various ways all are part of the discourse of the seventh century. All the important issues and events are present in the past created by Cogitosus, Muirchú, and Adomnán.

The problem of the style of seventh-century Hiberno-Latin writing has several solutions, then. The source of the style is complex, including elements of Late Latin, the Bible, and native Irish oral poetry. The artistic use of the style is not merely decorative, but functions to show that the saints are not bound by mundane reality, but have a direct

⁵¹⁵ Sharpe, *Adamnan*, 30-34 and Anderson and Anderson, xxxiii-xxxvi. The number of stories dealing with Bridei and the Picts is large: "Something like a sixth of Adomnán's stories are set in the country of the Picts where Columba visits the king Bridei . . ." (Anderson and Anderson xxxiii).

⁵¹⁶ Adomnán, *DVC* 1.13 and 14, on Diarmait's son Aed Slane, and 1.36, where he calls Diarmait "totius Scotiae regnatorem deo auctore ordinatum" (Anderson and Anderson 37-39 and 65-67). This is a long story of Diarmait's slayer: see Chapter 6 "Signs and Wonders" above.

connection to the world of heaven; that in turn gives their deeds and sayings even more power and effect in this world. This is the final reason for the style: to promote the political and ecclesiastical elites of the seventh century by showing their origins in the divinely sanctioned actions of the saints.

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